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Detective Matt's Man-Hunt; OR, DOWNING The DESPERATE DOZEN. BY NED ST. MEYER.



"OH, MATT, HOW GLAD I AM THAT YOU HAVE COME."

Detective Matt's Man-Hunt:

OR,

Downing the Desperate Dozen.

BY NED ST. MEYER.

CHAPTER I.

MATT ARRIVES IN DANVILLE.

BROWN's mill was haunted.

All Danville said so, and certainly Danville ought to know.

The old mill stood on the bank of the Roneoco River, nearly a mile above the town.

It had not been used for two years.

Previous to that time old Pop Brown, a miserly man of seventy, had ground the corn and rye for any of the farmers who cared to patronize him.

But one day Pop Brown got into a dispute with a stranger who stopped at the mill. Hot words passed, and the old miller drew a pistol and fired.

The bullet passed through the stranger's ear, and he fled, muttering vengeance.

Two days passed; then all Danville was startled by the news that Pop Brown had been found hanging by a rope from the peak of the mill roof.

The old miller was stone-dead. Though he was hung up by the neck, indications showed that he had died in a struggle with some unknown assailant previous to his being strung up.

The police endeavored in vain to find the assassin, or to discover the motive for the murder.

No clue of any kind had been left; the miller's enemy was unidentified and unknown.

The old man had been alone in the world, keeping house for himself in two rooms adjoining the mill. He was a widower, and it was known that he had had a daughter, but she had been driven away by harsh treatment, and nothing had been heard of her for years.

Pop Brown was buried, and after the investigation had failed to develop even a clue, the mystery was gradually allowed to die out, the mill was unused and deserted; no one came forward to claim the property, and, indeed, no one cared to go near it.

It was not long before it was said to be haunted, and when two trusty citizens of Danville declared that they had seen the ghost of old Brown dancing on the great water-wheel, the statement was accepted as true.

Almost immediately the road that ran past the mill fell into disuse; a new road, making a *detour* of some five hundred feet, was opened, and used at all times, and only the bravest of the Danvilleites ever dared to pass the haunted building even in broad daylight, at night no person ventured there.

This, in brief, was the story that was told to young Matt Morrison as he sat on the porch of Billy Banter's tavern on the evening of his arrival in Danville.

Matt was a youth of just over seventeen, small of stature, but with muscles which constant exercise had made hard as steel. He was a fine-looking boy, whose frank and intelligent countenance had won for him the confidence of the good-natured tavern-keeper.

"And what might be your business in Danville, if I may be so bold as to ask?" inquired Billy Banter, later on.

"I haven't any—that is, nothing in particular," replied Matt. "I have just returned from Idaho."

"You don't say! 'Way out there?"

"It isn't far—only about two thousand miles."

"Two thousand miles! I call that a pretty good stretch," responded Banter. "What was you doing 'way out there?"

"Prospecting and investigating."

"Did you have any luck?"

"One way, but not in another."

"How's that?"

"My father and I went out. We raked in about fifteen hundred dollars' worth of silver and a little gold and then some outlaws came along, cleaned us out of all but about ten ounces, and shot my father."

"Dead?"

"He lived only a day." Matt swallowed a hard lump in his throat as he spoke. "I'd like to meet the man who did the dastardly deed!" he added, with fierce emphasis.

"Would you recognize him if you saw him?"

"Reckon I would."

"I suppose it was tough on your mother, too," continued Banter, sympathetically.

"No, it was only hard on me. My dear mother was spared the sad news. It was her sudden death that made my father and I sell off our household stuff in Kansas City and strike out for the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains."

"I see. Then you are now alone in the world?"

"Yes, all alone."

"It's too bad. I really feel sorry for you!" and warm-hearted Billy Banter laid a kindly hand on Matt's shoulder.

"I suppose you haven't settled what you are going to do yet?" he went on inquisitively.

"Yes, I have," was the quiet answer. "I intend to find the villain who killed my father!"

"What? It's a big job for a boy, ain't it?"

"I don't care how big it is. I'm going to find him if it takes all my life."

"Hang me if I don't admire your grit!" cried Banter, enthusiastically.

"I will never rest content until I shoot him down or hand him over to justice."

"Have you any idea where he is?"

The boy looked at the tavern-keeper for a moment.

"I reckon I can trust you," he at length responded.

"Bet your boots you can! Billy Banter never yet went back on any honest man."

Matt leaned forward.

"I have an idea the man is somewhere in the neighborhood of Danville," he whispered.

The tavern-keeper started back.

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes, I do. I wouldn't have come here if I had not thought so. I'm only worth a hundred and fifty dollars, and I can't afford—What's that?"

As Matt spoke a slight noise was heard near the end of the porch.

"It's the chickens," replied Banter. "Or maybe a stray porker. They get under the porch once in a while."

"I wouldn't like our conversation to be overheard," returned Matt, seriously and suspiciously.

He arose, and took a careful survey.

"No one in sight," he added.

"What makes you think the murderer of your father is in Danville?" asked Banter, curiously.

"On account of this letter, which I picked up after the struggle. A moment after my father was killed I was struck on the head with the butt of a gun and knocked unconscious. When I came to myself I found the robbers had gone, and the letter lay near my father's body."

As Matt spoke he produced a dirty envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket, and took from it this epistle, written in a large, bold hand:

"FRIEND HANK:—If you want easy times give up the profess out in Idaho and come to Danville. I, Ranvelt, Corkey and several others are making money hand over fist, at the old trade. I will be at the Mansard Hotel, Chicago, on the first of next month,

and if you will meet me I will put you onto a big thing.

"Your old pard,

"AMOS PYLER"

Billy Banter read the letter over several times.

"Hang me if I can make head or tail out of it," he declared, rubbing his chin, reflectively. "Who is it addressed to?"

"Mr. Hank Conomo, Wild Flume City P. O., Idaho," replied the youth. "Did you ever hear any of these names before?"

The tavern keeper thought a moment.

"I guess not. I—hold up! Yes, I have! Two strangers were here not two weeks ago and one of 'em called the other Corkey."

"Hal! Are you sure?" eagerly.

"Certain! He only did it once, though, and then the other chap tipped him the wink and after that there was no names mentioned."

"How did the fellow look?"

"Who? Corkey?"

"No, the other."

"Rather tall and slim."

"Was he dark?"

"Yes, very dark, and had straight black hair. I guess he had Mexican or Indian blood in him."

Matt's eyes began to flash. Had he struck a clue?

"What became of the men?"

"I don't know. They only got off of their horses here to take a drink."

"Which way did they go when they left?"

"Up the river road toward Wingate's Landing. Do you think—"

"I think one of them was my man," said Matt, decidedly. "Of course he hasn't the least idea that I am within a thousand miles of Danville, or he wouldn't dare show his face."

At this instant a boy came out on the porch.

"If you please the missis says the supper's ready," he announced.

"Then we'll go in at once," decided Banter, rising from his chair. "You must be pretty hungry."

"Rather. I've ridden two hundred and ten miles on the cars to-day besides twelve miles on the stage-coach."

"We'll soon fill you up," assured the tavern-keeper, "and then I'll drink success to your plucky undertaking," he added, heartily.

Matt arose and followed his host into the tavern.

Hardly had the door closed before the tall, slim form of a man emerged from under the porch!

He sprung to his feet, brushing the dirt from his sombrero and his clothing as he did so.

"Hal! hal! I am in luck, as usual!" he muttered to himself, in a slight Spanish accent. "I discovered the boy just in the nick of time. Curse that letter! It has betrayed me. But, never mind, I shall be on my guard, and the first good chance I get the son shall follow his father. Hank Conomo is not to be trifled with. Let the young fool beware!"

And with these words the murderer of Matt Morrison's father slunk away in the fast-gathering darkness.

CHAPTER II.

IN PERIL.

PERHAPS a few words respecting the young investigator's early history would not be amiss.

He was born in Buffalo, and lived there for twelve years, attending school regularly and taking a great interest in gymnastic exercises and also rifle-practice. His father was a builder and fairly well-to-do.

When Matt was thirteen years old, Mr. Morrison removed his family to Kansas City.

Detective Matt's Man-Hunt.

Here unfortunate building speculations swallowed up all of the father's hard-earned savings, and then came the mother's unexpected death.

Mr. Morrison and Matt were nearly heart-broken over their loss. The boss carpenter lost all interest in his trade, and when Matt suggested that they go West he readily consented.

Mr. Morrison had been a California gold-seeker of '48 and '49, and it was but natural that he should strike out for Idaho, where, so he learned, rich silver-beds had been discovered.

Nearly three years were spent among the wilds of the Territory, with what result we already know.

It was during this time that our hero gained the sobriquet of Idaho Matt, a nickname that suited him perfectly, for all of his time was spent among the mountains, either afoot or on horseback.

He was a crack-shot with the rifle, and could run like a deer.

Before the terrible calamity just narrated had occurred, no lad was of a more cheerful or sunny disposition than he.

But the father's tragic end had taken the brightness out of his life. The boy was living for a purpose, and he meant to accomplish his end even though it cost him his life.

Danville was a booming Western village. For years it had lived on, counting just a score of houses, no more and no less.

Now, however, the real estate men had taken hold of the place, and intended to boom it for all it was worth.

"I expect this here tavern will be chuck up clear to the roof," said Billy Banter, during the progress of the meal. "John Section, the land agent, says he's got sixteen people coming down to look for town lots next week, besides six families that's coming to build."

"Reckon your place needs waking up," said Matt.

"You see, the T. B. and W. A. H. Road is coming through here soon, and that makes the difference. People won't have to come in by stage-coach any more."

"I see. By-the-way, when does the night stage from Wingate's Landing get in?"

"About nine o'clock."

"Do you expect any passengers?"

"Ain't had any this week so far. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I want to see everybody who goes out and comes in, that's all," replied our hero, pointedly.

"I see," responded Billy Banter. "Here's to the success I spoke of," he added, tossing off a glass of red-eye.

"Thanks," replied Matt. He did not drink himself, but, nevertheless, appreciated the toast, grim as it was.

Supper was over, and Matt was quietly glancing through the columns of an old Chicago newspaper when the Roneoco Valley stage-coach drew up to the door.

Contrary to Billy Banter's expectations, two passengers alighted.

One was a well-built and stylishly-dressed gentleman of forty or forty-five, with a keen face, and a pair of ferret-like eyes.

The other was a girl scarcely fifteen years of age. The moment that Matt's eyes rested upon her he decided that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Her form was plump and graceful, her face clear-cut and rosy, and her head one mass of golden curls.

"Well, by the jumping poker!" ejaculated Banter. "Darn me if the gent ain't got a reg'lar angel in tow!"

He ran down to get the mail from the stage-driver, and then gave attention to the gentleman, who wished to inquire about accommodations.

Meanwhile the young lady turned toward the porch where Matt was standing.

"Please, is this Danville?" she asked, displaying a set of pearly teeth.

"Yes, miss," replied Matt politely raising his sombrero.

The girl drew down her face.

"It's not much of a place," she said.

"No, it's only a village," returned Matt.

"A tavern, a store and a handful of people." "By what Mr. Dinsmore said I thought it must be quite a town."

"Is that Mr. Dinsmore?"

"Yes. He's my guardian. This is the tavern I suppose. Do you belong here?"

"No, I'm only stopping here."

"I thought you didn't look much like a tavern-keeper. You are—"

"My name is Matthew Morrison, but my friends all call me Idaho Matt."

"Idaho Matt! That's a nice name. Mine is Estelle Dinsmore; but I am usually called Stella."

"Then your guardian is a relative."

"He married my great-aunt, that's all—the name has nothing to do with it."

"Are you acquainted in Danville, Miss Dinsmore?"

"No, don't know a soul."

"If you don't know any one it will be rather lonesome around here for you."

"I suppose so. I'm sure I don't know what made Mr. Dinsmore come to this outlandish place."

"Well, Stella, who is this you've found to talk to?" broke in the cold voice of Mr. Gregory Dinsmore, who at that moment appeared on the piazza.

"Mr. Matt Morrison, sir," replied the young girl.

"And pray who is Mr. Matt Morrison?" went on the gentleman, with a cold stare at Matt.

"He's—he's stopping here," was Stella's somewhat confused reply.

"Humph! Very definite, I must say. Don't you know better than to speak to every stranger you meet? Come into the hotel."

"I'm sure Mr. Morrison has acted like a gentleman," replied the girl, the blood rushing to her cheeks at the unkind words.

"Never mind, you don't know what he is. He may be a horse-thief or something worse for all you know. Come in instantly."

"Excuse me, Mr. Dinsmore, but I'm no horse-thief," put in Matt, "and, saving the presence of the young lady, I'd have had you covered with this long ago, for hinting so."

As our hero spoke he exhibited the handle of the revolver that stuck in his belt.

The gentleman turned slightly pale.

"I didn't say you were," he said, hastily.

"Our dress and speech out here may not be quite up to the Boston standard," went on Matt, quietly. "But there are just as many honest hearts under woollen shirts as there are under broadcloth coats."

"No doubt, no doubt. Still it is not customary for cattle—ahem—ranch gentlemen to speak to ladies until they are introduced."

Matt offered no reply to this. Stella Dinsmore had been the first to speak, but he was not going to be ungallant enough to tell of it.

"I'll introduce you," put in the well-meaning Banter, hastily.

"I don't wish any introduction," replied Mr. Dinsmore, frigidly. "Stella, come in. We will have supper."

The gentleman passed into the tavern.

"I hope you won't think it's my fault," said Stella to Matt, hurriedly. "My guardian is a perfect bear."

"Certainly not. You are not in the least to blame," returned Matt. "Wait till he's out here awhile; he'll get some high-toned notions knocked out of him."

"I wish you had pointed that pistol at him," went on the girl, with a momentary twinkle in her eye. "He would have been frightened to death."

She followed room, and p tavern-keeper on them.

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mountaineer, named Beane, "I'll bet it was set on fire."

"What makes you think so, Rube?" asked Banter, eagerly.

"'Cause I do. Besides, I saw a tall chap sneaking around here, less than two hours ago, when I drove past to go to Mancy Odell's house."

Matt pricked up his ears.

"What kind of a chap was he?" he asked.

"I couldn't see him very well. I thought he might be some one who was stopping here and was just going out to the barn to look after his horse."

"I didn't know any one around here had any grudge against me," said Banter. "I always try to treat every one fair and square."

"Ef it's so, an' we ketch the chap we'll string him up pretty quick," put in another. "We don't want no sech dirty doin's as that around Danville."

The rooms up-stairs had not been damaged by the fire, and after the last of the outsiders had departed, Matt and the others again retired Stella, once more thanking our hero for his bravery.

Matt's sleep was a troubled one. The excitement attendant upon the fire and the rescue of Stella Dinsmore made him restless. He tumbled and tossed for fully an hour before he lay quiet, and even then a strange shiver ran over him.

Meanwhile from out of the shadows behind the farm stole the form of a tall, dark man, the same who, earlier in the evening, had played the eavesdropper.

His face scowled deeply, and his black eyes gleamed with malice.

"They have retired again and all the others are gone," he muttered to himself. "What a pity the old place did not burn down with that accursed boy in it! I have had all my work for nothing. Never mind, this time I will make sure!"

He moved around to the front of the barn. A ladder rested near-by, and taking it up, he approached the house.

"This is the right window, I am positive," he went on. "Up in yonder chamber, that boy sleeps, never dreaming of the danger at hand. Ha! ha! my fine fellow! You are a clever chap, but you will find it a costly undertaking to try capturing Hank Conomo!"

At this instant the clatter of a horse's hoofs upon the stony road broke the stillness. Putting down the ladder Conomo shrunk back behind a tree.

The horseman came to a halt some distance from the house, and dismounting, walked rapidly toward the barn.

"As I live, it is Ranvelt!" exclaimed Conomo to himself. "He said he wasn't going to leave the mill to-night. What does it mean?"

The new-comer spent several minutes looking around the barn. Then he approached the house, nearly stumbling over Conomo in the semi-darkness.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, drawing a pistol.

Conomo put up his hand.

"Don't shoot, Pete," he cried, in an intense whisper.

"Hank! You?"

"Yes—don't make any noise."

"What are you doing here?"

"Suppose I ask the same question of you," returned the assassin, coolly.

"You are after the girl?"

"What girl?"

"You know well enough."

"No, I know not."

"What are you up to?"

Conomo looked at his companion sharply.

"You tell me, I tell you," he said.

"Very well, Hank," replied Ranvelt.

"Up—in this hotel is the prettiest girl a man ever feasted his eyes on. She was a passenger on the stage this evening. I saw her as

they went past the upper mill road, and I sent Corkey to find out all about her."

"Well?"

"I want her and I'm going to have her."

"Love or ransom?" queried Conomo.

"The first if the gal takes to me. If she don't I'll make her guardian pay a good round sum to get her back. Now, what's your lay?"

"Death."

"No!" cried Ranvelt, darting back.

"Yes. Up yonder lies a boy who must not live. As long as he does my life is in danger."

"Who is he?"

"Never mind. He shall not live. It is his life or mine, and I have sworn it."

"How will you enter?"

"By this ladder."

"Ha! I have an idea. We will go up together. The girl's room is next to this one. See, I have chloroform. I can capture her easily, without noise. Let us work hand-in-hand."

"I agree," said Conomo. "But we must be quick."

A moment later the ladder was raised and its upper end rested lightly against the window.

Conomo was the first to mount.

Reaching the window he peered in. All was quiet, and, drawing his stiletto, he stepped noiselessly into the apartment.

A faint light guided him to the bedside. The form of the sleeper was but dimly visible, and the villain put out his hand to make sure.

There was a sudden start. Then the cold steel gleamed in the air and was driven into its hapless victim's body.

A groan, and all was quiet.

"He's finished!" muttered Conomo, coolly. "Come, Pete, now for the girl!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE ABDUCTION.

IDAHO MATT'S first night at Billy Banter's tavern was destined to be an eventful one.

How long he slept after the fire, he could not tell.

Suddenly he found himself sitting bolt upright in bed and wide awake.

What had aroused him?

"I'd be almost willing to bet I heard some one scream," he said, to himself. "Or was it only a dream?"

He listened intently. Not a sound was to be heard throughout the house.

"Oh, pshaw! my nerves are getting worse than a cat's! This little side-show excitement has worked me all up."

He waited a moment longer, and then lay back again.

"I am glad I had the chance of doing Miss Dinsmore a favor," he went on. "It wasn't such a tremendously exciting thing to do, but I reckon it's given her a fair idea about me. She's as pretty as— What in thunder was that?"

This time he sprang clear into the middle of the room. The unmistakable tread of heavy footsteps had sounded through the hall.

"Somebody moving about," he thought. "Perhaps it's Banter, or Mr. Dinsmore? Reckon they're as nervous as I am, and maybe worse."

For a third time the young detective retired. But not for long. Hardly had his head touched the pillow before a genuine scream made him jump up and slip into his trousers.

"No mistake about that," he muttered to himself as he reached for his revolver. "It sounded like a woman's voice, too."

He threw open the hall-door. No one was in sight, and he stepped out.

"Hello, here's the girl's door open!" he exclaimed, to himself. "What does this mean? Miss Dinsmore, are you up?" he called.

There was no reply.

"Miss Dinsmore!" this time in a louder key.

Still no answer.

"Queer. Something's wrong—"

At that instant the sound of hurried voices in the next chamber broke upon his ear.

"Quick, Hank! We are discovered! Some one is coming!"

"It's from Mr. Dinsmore's room!" cried Matt. "Is it robbery, or—"

Abduction! He did not say the word, but he thought it.

With a single bound he reached the door of the lawyer's chamber.

He was just in time to see the form of Pete Ranvelt disappear through the window.

"Stop!" he exclaimed. "Stop! Or I'll fire!"

But the form of the abductor was no longer in sight.

Matt rushed to the window. He saw the ladder and the two men beneath.

Between them they carried a heavy burden, covered with a shawl.

"They are carrying off Stella Dinsmore!" he exclaimed, in horror.

Pointing his pistol at the foremost of the two men he fired.

There was a cry of pain, and the man's left arm dropped to his side.

"Curses upon him!" cried Hank Conomo.

"The ball has clipped my arm!"

"Quick—get behind the trees," warned Ranvelt. "The man seems to be a good shot."

His warning was quickly obeyed, and the two, with their insensible burden, hurried to where Ranvelt's horse stood in waiting.

"Daddy will easily carry us both, but what will you do?" he asked.

"I will run," replied Conomo. "If they follow I will take to the mountains."

Meanwhile Matt had tore back to his own room, put on his boots and hat and flew back to the window, crying loudly for help all the time.

But no one answered his call. Not even Mr. Dinsmore, who still lay stretched out upon the bed.

Approaching the bed Matt shook Mr. Dinsmore vigorously.

"Wake up! Wake up!" he exclaimed.

But the lawyer showed no signs of waking.

"Mr. Dinsmore, wake up! Your ward is—My God, the man is dead!"

It was true. By a great mistake the lawyer's heart had received the fatal stiletto's thrust that Hank Conomo had intended for our hero.

"He has been murdered!" cried Matt, in horror. "His life has been taken in cold blood. I must go after the assassins. No deed like this shall go unpunished if Idaho Matt can prevent it!"

He gave one more loud cry to arouse the house. Then he slid down the ladder and hurried across the yard.

Ranvelt had already mounted his horse, his precious burden hanging meanwhile over his shoulder. In the clearer light our hero could distinctly see the girl's pale and beautiful face.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop your knavish work, or I'll riddle you with bullets."

He had hardly spoken before a bullet whizzed past his ear.

He waited no longer. Taking careful aim he fired.

With a wild cry Ranvelt threw up his arms.

"I'm done for!" he howled, and slipped down in a heap to the ground.

Matt sprang forward and caught Stella in his arms. The girl was just regaining consciousness, and gave a deep shudder.

"Where am I?" she murmured.

"Safe," replied her rescuer.

But even as he spoke he felt a sharp blow upon his neck. Millions of stars danced before his eyes, and releasing his hold upon Stella Dinsmore he fell back.

Stealthily Hank Conomo had slipped up behind and dealt our hero a crack with a club that had been lying near.

As Matt sunk down he gazed at the boy's face in amazement.

"Not dead!" he exclaimed. "Not even wounded! Who did I kill if not him?"

"Who are you?" cried Stella. "What have you done to him? Where are you taking me?"

"You will soon find out," responded Conomo, grimly. "First, however, to finish my work here. This time there shall be no mistake. Here is for poor Pete as well as myself."

As he spoke he drew his pistol and pointed it at Matt's head.

Stella saw the action. For an instant she was paralyzed with fear; then the brave girl rushed forward.

"No! no! you shall not!" she exclaimed.

"Out of the way, girl!" cried Conomo.

He tried to force her aside. But she threw herself before Matt and refused to move.

"Do what you please with me," she pleaded, "but spare him."

"Ha! what is he to you?" demanded the would-be assassin.

"Nothing," replied Stella, with a deep blush. "But he saved my life."

"Bah! Out of the way I say!"

"I will not."

"Then I'll make you!"

"Never! You can kill me first."

"Ha! ha! what an angel you are!" laughed Conomo. "Kill you? No, indeed! I know a trick worth two of that."

He caught the girl by the wrist and dragged her to one side.

Suddenly Stella clutched the pistol and wrenched it from his hand. The next instant the weapon was sent flying into the bushes across the road.

"Curse you!" roared Conomo, in fierce anger.

He had no other shooting-iron. But in his belt hung a glittering sheath-knife.

"I'll finish him with this!" he muttered, and whipped the knife out.

Meanwhile Matt was coming rapidly to himself. Everything around him seemed uncertain, the very ground appeared to move under him.

Yet he realized that danger was near.

An ear-splitting scream from Stella Dinsmore made him brace up. As Conomo, knife in hand, advanced upon him, he drew his pistol again.

The assassin saw the weapon. At heart a coward, he could not face the danger. He crouched back and slunk toward the house.

Matt tried to rise to his feet, but staggered and fell.

In an instant Conomo had seized Stella by the waist, and despite the brave girl's struggles, he bore her to the horse, which was now evidently impatient to be off.

Resting on his elbow, Matt fired at the assassin, but his aim was bad, and the bullet flew wide of the mark.

By this time Conomo was in the saddle, with Stella Dinsmore in his arms. In an instant he had dug his heels into the horse's sides, and the animal started off at a bound.

Again Matt tried to gain his feet. This time he succeeded. He pointed his pistol at the retreating horseman, and then lowered his arm.

"It is too risky," he murmured. "I wouldn't hit her for the world. For the present he is safe, but it won't be for long!"

What was to be done? Apparently the exciting events had attracted no one's atten-

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stepped

ahead.

Detective Matt's Man-Hunt

"I may want your help in waiting on this girl and watching her: can I rely on you?"

"Haven't you allers done so?"

"Very well. I want to keep her away from everybody else—understand? I'll pay you well."

"Ke-rect, captain. I'm your man every time. And, captain—"

"Well?"

The old man stepped up close.

"I want to speak to you about Smart," he whispered.

"What of him?"

"Not much, only I think he ain't to be trusted."

Conomo's brow contracted.

"What makes you think so?"

"Certain little things I see'd and heard."

"Very well. We will have a talk later on. The girl is coming to now, and I want to put her in a safe place."

"Ranvelt was going to lock her up in the metal-room."

"Yes? Then I'll follow out his idea. Come to me as soon as you are relieved."

"I will, captain."

Hank Conomo continued on his way down the passage. At length he came to a large opening with six doors, three on either side and one at the far end.

Going up to the middle door on the left, he felt down in his pocket for a key with which to unlock it.

As he did so he suddenly felt a pair of slender hands grasp him tightly by the throat.

Stella Dinsmore had recovered from her faint several minutes before. She had overheard the conversation between the assassin and the guard, and, filled with horror at the thought of being imprisoned, racked her brains trying to think of some means of escape.

In sheer desperation she caught Conomo by the throat. In vain the man tried to shake her off or cry for help. With a power born only of excitement the girl held on like grim death.

At length, purple in the face, the man showed signs of sinking to the ground. His legs tottered beneath him and his grasp relaxed.

Then the girl sprung away. Like a frightened deer she flew down the passageway.

Doodle heard her coming, but before he could jump to stop her she was past him.

Snatching up his rifle, he started in pursuit. Behind him he heard Conomo's feeble voice calling out to stop the girl.

Stella heard the cry also, and it only tended to increase her speed.

Without a light the way was dangerous. When she came to the three steps down she fell, severely injuring her shoulder.

Picking herself up again, she dashed on wildly.

At length the stone steps were reached. She ascended to the top, and applied all her force to the trap-door overhead, her heart meanwhile beating like a trip-hammer.

The door was heavy and at first refused to move. Gradually, however, she forced it open and it fell back just as Doodle reached the lower step.

With a bound she reached the mill-room overhead. A moment more and she would be free!

She sprung toward the open door. As she did so she uttered an ejaculation of horror, and her heart sunk within her as she found herself confronted by Corkey!

CHAPTER VI.

IN EXTREME PERIL.

MEANWHILE, what of Idaho Matt?

A sudden turn in the road made Conomo and his hapless burden disappear, and fearful that the assassin might take to the bushes and escape, our hero tried to urge his steed

But now the road was wilder than before, and the horse had to pick his way among the rocks.

At length he reached the turn, and was astonished to find the abductor's horse standing in the middle of the road. The animal was riderless, and Matt instantly drew up to see what was the matter.

As he did so a report rung out close at hand. Luckily at the same instant his horse started back, and the bullet that Corkey had intended for our hero's breast just clipped the animal's mane.

Without hesitation Idaho Matt dropped to the steed's side, and, wheeling him around, darted down the road.

He realized what a disadvantage he would be under if he remained a target in the road.

Two hundred feet back he dismounted and crept into the bushes, determined to meet his opponent on foot.

He had a fair idea from whence the shot had proceeded, and made his way in the direction as fast as the thick undergrowth would permit.

His step was noiseless, and he kept his eyes and ears on the alert for the least signs of the man he was pursuing.

He reached the spot, and walked all around it. Then he stood stock still and listened intently.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the night. Not a soul was in sight, and all was quiet as the grave.

Conomo's horse still stood in the road where the assassin had left him. Corkey, thinking he had killed Matt and that the horse had turned and ran in fear, had hurried off to the haunted mill.

Our hero grated his teeth in vexation. Had the villain who had carried off fair Stella Dinsmore escaped him? No, no, it could not, it must not be!

Suddenly the clatter of horses' hoofs far down the road broke upon his ears. They came from the direction of Danville. Who could it be? The tavern-keeper and his friends?

For a moment Matt paused, not knowing how best to proceed.

Confident that the abductor had left the vicinity with his fair victim, Matt emerged into the road. Hardly had he reached Conomo's horse before three horsemen burst upon his view.

They were Rube Beane, the mountaineer, and two citizens of Danville.

"Hello, what's this?" exclaimed Beane, pulling up. "By gopher, if it ain't the fellow now! I was sure that he had made tracks this way."

"Hello," returned Matt. "Where is Banter?"

"Gone tudder way," was the mountaineer's reply. "Where is the gal?"

"I don't know, she—"

"Yer lie, yer do!"

As Beane spoke he aimed his pistol at Matt's head.

"I didn't trust you from the start," he went on. "Tell me what you've done with that gal or I'll make the moonbeams shine through you."

For a moment Matt was dumfounded.

"What do you mean?" he ejaculated.

"Jest what I say. You can't play no game on us, kin he, boys?"

"Waal, I reckon not," returned one of the others. "Danvillers is no dough-heads, by gosh!"

"I don't know where Miss Dinsmore is," explained Matt. "I was following the man who ran off with her, but he disappeared just about here."

There were several seconds of silence.

"Reckon that story don't wash," said the man who had remained silent. "Where is yer pardner, quick now, we don't take no foolin'!"

"I am alone," replied Matt, as calmly as

he could, for he could readily see that the three men were rough customers and terribly excited. "I heard a noise and discovered two men running away with the young lady. I called for help and went after the men. I shot one of them down in the yard, and followed the other on horseback."

"All dressed, too, I suppose," sneered Beane.

"No, I went back for my clothes."

"We reached the yard, and didn't see no dead man," put in Wilkinson, the second man. "Reckon it's a cock-and-bull story. Tell us where yer pard and the gal is or we'll make short work of you."

"I'm telling a straight story. If you want to find Miss Dinsmore do as I'm doing, hunt for her. Don't cast any slurs on me."

Matt spoke in short, decided words, and emphasized his remarks by putting his hand upon the butt of his pistol.

Beane drew back.

"Well, that's cool," he exclaimed.

"Maybe it is, but just the same I mean it," returned the youth. "I didn't have any more to do with carrying off Miss Dinsmore than you had, and I'm as anxious as any one to restore her to—"

Matt stopped short. He was going to say guardian, but suddenly remembered that Mr. Dinsmore was dead.

"Restore her to who?" asked Beane. "The old man's dead."

"I know it."

"Hal' how? Was you in his room?" inquired Foley, the third of the trio.

Matt was silent. He saw that he had made a mistake.

"Why don't you speak up?" went on the other.

"You'd do better to search around for Miss Dinsmore than to stand talking here."

"Maybe," put in Beane, grimly. "But we won't lose sight of you while we're doing it. Wilkinson, jest keep an eye on him."

"Bet I will."

"What do you mean?" demanded Matt.

"Nuthin', only if you try to escape, you'll find yerself deader'n a mackerel."

"I tell you that you are all wrong," insisted Matt. "The young lady was stolen by two men, who also murdered her guardian, and—"

"And you are one of the two," said Foley. "Oh, you can't fool us, nohow!"

"Not a bit of it, and we'll either have the gal or have your life," added Beane, roughly. "You belong to the Eagle Mountain Gang, and we intend to wipe out the hull crowd before we're done with 'em."

Of course all this was new and strange to Matt.

He was completely bewildered, and knew not what to do. He realized that he was in a certain sense a prisoner, and in the mean time Stella might be carried, he knew not where.

The thought was maddening.

"You're a set of fools," he said. "I'm a stranger here, just come from Idaho; I know nothing about the girl, except that I saw her carried off and went to the rescue."

"It's a lie!" burst out Beane.

"Take that back!" cried Matt, whipping out his pistol.

Foley caught his arm and snatched the weapon away.

"Take all his stuff away from him!" roared Beane, in a rage. "He's young, but he may be tricky."

He had hardly spoken before Foley and Wilkinson fell upon the youth. In vain Matt struggled. Everything, even to his pocket-knife, was taken from him.

"Yer thought you'd git away with Billy's horse, too," went on Beane. "I reckon you tried it fust by setting the house on fire; but that plan didn't work. The old man kept too close a watch on the gal."

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Matt, as calmly as he could.

"You'll find out fast enough, never fear," returned the mountaineer.

"Come, Foley, we'll take a look around for the chap's past."

"Ke-rect, Rube. Which way?"

"Straight ahead. You take the bushes on the right, and I'll take 'em on the left."

Beane and Foley departed, and the young detective was left in charge of Wilkinson.

Matt knew not what to do. The man who was guarding him held a pistol in readiness to use upon the slightest provocation. An attempt at escape would have been dangerous and foolhardy.

In a quarter of an hour Beane and Foley returned. As may be surmised, they had discovered nothing. They had taken the upper road, and not passed within five hundred feet of the mill.

"Reckon we can git back to Danville," remarked Beane. "It's getting darker than ever, and we might pass within ten feet of the fellow and the gal without knowing it, unless she hollered."

"Reckon they gagged her," said Wilkinson.

"No, they used chloroform," replied Foley. "Billy found the rag."

Matt was made to mount the horse that Conomo had rode, the animal being led by Beane. In the rear rode Wilkinson with Banter's steed, and Foley brought up alongside.

On the way back the men said but little. Matt's thoughts were busy. He knew the wild ways of this region well, and could not help but shudder as he thought of what might be the consequences of the night's adventures.

At length the tavern appeared in sight. All the lights around the place were lit, and groups of excited men were passing in and out. The news of the murder and abduction had spread rapidly.

Among the number was Billy Banter, who with another man, had just returned from the opposite direction with positive news that no one had passed that way for several hours.

Matt was soon the center of an excited mob. A dozen questions were asked him at once, and hardly time was given him to answer one.

A few, who were inclined to believe his story, made a search for Ranvelt's body. But the corpse was not found, and this only brought fresh doubts.

Matt told his story as best he could. The most attentive listener was Billy Banter, and, in truth, the tavern-keeper remained the only one to believe the boy.

Presently one of the men whispered something to Beane.

"What is your full name?" questioned the mountaineer.

"Matthew Morrison."

"Ha, that's it, M. M.," cried several.

"The first letters is the same!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Matt.

"When yer stuck the old gent yer left yer dagger in him," was the response. "And it's got yer letters on it. See here."

As the man spoke he held the stiletto up. Our hero gave one look at it, and uttered a loud cry.

M. M. had been the initials of Matt's father. A Spaniard had given him the dagger about a year before his death. On the night of the raid by Conomo and his gang the assassin had stolen the stiletto.

Like lightning the truth flashed over Matt's mind.

The man who had killed Mr. Dinsmore and carried off Stella was the assassin of his father!

The revelation made him stagger back.

His cry and movements were taken as an expression of guilt.

"He can't stand the proofs of his crime,"

sneered Beane. "Boys, what shall we do with the skunk?"

"Lynch him!"

"Put a bullet through his head!"

"String 'im up! He's guilty, sure enough."

"Certainly he is. Hang him!"

Matt folded his arms.

"Before God and man I swear I am innocent," he said.

But they would not listen to him. Five minutes later a rope was procured and one end thrown over the lower limb of a near-by tree.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ABDUCTED GIRL.

For an instant as Stella Dinsmore confronted Corkey at the door of the Haunted Mill, the girl knew not what to do. The old man Doodle was only a few steps behind her, gun in hand. An instant more and she would be in his power.

As for the outlaw at the door her appearance before him was so unexpected that he could only stare at her in open-mouthed astonishment.

The girl did not hesitate. With a bound she leaped past him. As she did so he put out his hand to detain her, but was unsuccessful; the agile Stella escaped his clutch.

"Catch her!" exclaimed Doodle. "She's escaped from the captain!"

Scrambling up to the mill floor he made for the door, and having recovered himself, Corkey joined in the pursuit.

"Captain Hank will be as mad as a hornet if she escapes," went on Doodle, puffing from the unusual violence of his exertions.

"What did he let her git away fer?" growled Corkey. "Darn ef I hain't got to do all his work for him to-night."

Nevertheless, he followed Stella as rapidly as he could, soon getting considerably ahead of the old man.

Behind them, both could hear Conomo approaching as fast as possible.

As for Stella, the moment she emerged from the mill she flew up the road as fast as her strength would permit.

She knew nothing of the road, where it led to, or where she was going. Her one thought was to get away as far as she could from her pursuers.

The lonely way was dark and dangerous. Twice she fell, and these falls added to that she had had in the underground passage, made every bone in her body ache. She knew it would be useless to cry out, and so sped on, her heart in her throat.

At length, all out of breath, she stopped short. Listening, she heard the men but a short distance behind.

She was too exhausted to run another step. Crossing to the side of the road that led down to the river she forced a way into the bushes. Directly before her was a small hollow, and into this she crouched, and waited.

She held her breath as her pursuers approached. Conomo was now in front with Corkey beside him.

"She could not have got further than this," remarked the assassin. "Go ahead, I will search around the bushes here."

Conomo first examined the bushes at the upper side of the road. He did not go very far, however, and presently returned and made for the spot where the hapless girl lay concealed.

When the assassin approached, Stella gave a wild cry, and, springing up, attempted to flee.

In an instant he was after her, and the noise made by the two quickly brought Corkey and Doodle to the spot.

Stella turned directly toward the water. She could see it rolling darkly less than a hundred feet away.

Reaching the bank of the river, she paused

for a moment. The stream ran swiftly and the waters looked cold and sulien.

She could not swim. A plunge, and all would be over.

Just at that moment a swift hand descended upon her shoulder, and once again she found herself a prisoner.

"So, so, my pretty!" exclaimed Conomo, sharply. "I have you once more! This time I will make sure that you shall not escape me!"

So saying, he bound her hands tightly behind her.

"Who are you, and what are you going to do with me?" she demanded.

"You will know all in due time."

"I demand to know now."

"I am sorry, but I cannot inform you," he replied, sarcastically. "Come, we will go back to the place from which you escaped."

"I will not move a step. You have no right to treat me in this manner."

"I have a right to do as I choose. Corkey!" he called.

"Yes, captain!"

The man came running up.

"Got her, have yer?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Where is Doodle?"

"Here, captain."

"Do you refuse to walk back with us?" asked Conomo of Stella.

"I do."

"Then, men, you will have to carry her."

The two men approached the girl, and despite her struggles, seized her. As they lifted her up she gave several piercing screams.

"That will never do," exclaimed the assassin, in alarm. Corkey, gag her."

"I think that will keep you quiet," said Conomo, when the job was finished.

Stella was in an agony of suspense as to what the villains' future purposes were.

It was useless to struggle longer, so she lay quiet as the two men carried her back to the mill.

Inside of the haunted structure the gag was removed.

"Now will you go down like a lady or be forced?" asked Conomo.

Evidently the man was getting impatient and ugly.

"I'll go down," she said, with a shiver.

"Now you're talking like a sensible little lady!" said Conomo. "Doodle, you go first."

The old man did as directed. Then came Stella, with her abductor following, while Corkey remained behind to close the heavy trap-door.

In a few moments they had reached the door of the middle apartment on the left.

Picking up the key that he had dropped in his former struggle, Conomo unlocked the door and threw it open.

By the light of the lantern a small store-room, scarcely twelve feet square and eight high, was revealed.

"Here you are," said the assassin. "The place ain't well furnished, but I'll have it more comfortable soon."

"How long am I to stay here?" demanded the poor girl.

"It depends on yourself. Not long, I hope. Good-night, my pretty."

Conomo went out, locking the door securely again. Stella heard his footsteps recede, and then all was quiet as a tomb.

The poor girl could stand the strain no longer. Throwing herself down upon the cot, she burst into a flood of bitter tears.

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY BANTER MAKES A SPEECH.

MOUNTAIN MATT was evidently in one of the tightest scrapes of his life.

The men that surrounded him were evidently in dead earnest. They believed him guilty of an offense the penalty of which to them meant but one thing—death.

In vain did Matt protest that he was inno-

cent. The evidence against him was thought to be strong, and once public opinion turns against man or boy, it is all but impossible to change it.

The men of Danville believed that he belonged to the gang of outlaws that infested the Eagle Mountains, as the range that sloped up from the river was called. These men, some ten or fifteen in number, had been for several years the terror of the valley. They were known only by their deeds, as, up to this time, not one of them had ever been caught.

These outlaws had during their existence committed two murders, burned down several houses and stolen a number of horses, besides once holding up the Wingate's Landing stage and compelling the driver to hand over bullion to the amount of thirty thousand dollars which he was carrying.

It was judged that the outlaws had known of Mr. Dinsmore's coming with his rich ward, and had sent Matt to the tavern to get the lay of the land. The original plan must have been to fire the house and kidnap the girl during the excitement; but, this failing, the ruffians had resorted to even a worse method, killing the lawyer and carrying off the girl while under the influence of chloroform.

This was the way the Danvilleites reasoned out the case against Matt, and so positive were they that they were right, that it was only by sheer pluck that Billy Banter got permission to say a word in Matt's defense.

The tavern-keeper took a position on the stump of a tree but a few feet away from where the rope dangled that was to be used in the lynching. His head and his arms were bare, and in his right hand he held an old army revolver.

"Now I want you to understand that you have got to listen to me," he exclaimed, in a loud voice. "These are my premises and that boy is, or was, my guest. If he's to be hung, well and good, but he sha'n't be until I've had my say, and the first man that says me no gits the contents of this shooting-iron poured into him."

For a moment there was a murmur.

"Maybe ye'r interested in the disappearance of the gal, yerself," exclaimed a voice in the rear of the crowd.

"Who said that?" cried Banter, sternly.

There was no answer.

"Whoever it was is a coward, and had better clear out," continued the tavern keeper.

And then, after a pause:

"Now about this boy. I know something about his history. I know why he came to Danville. When the fire broke out, he saved the young lady's life at the risk of his own. Would an outlaw do that? I guess not. Now look at his face. Does he look like a horse-thief or a woman-stealer? I guess not. He's as honest and upright as they make them, and I warn every one of you against harming him. It's easy enough to take away a life, but you can't ever give it back again. Now I've had my say, and you can use your own judgment about going ahead."

Banter jumped down from the stump, and, putting his revolver back into his pocket, made his way to where Matt stood.

"Thank you, Mr. Banter," said the youth, warmly. "I had no right to expect so much at your hands."

"It ain't no more than one human owes to another," returned the tavern-keeper. "A great crime has been committed, but I don't believe in hanging the first man I catch for it," he added, for the benefit of those around him.

Banter's little speech had not been without effect. Most of the men were frequenters of the inn, and they knew the host to be a thoroughly honest man. Many who had been foremost in the unlawful work now

drew back, and the former hesitating ones declared that judgment had better be suspended.

"It would be an everlasting stain on Danville to hang an innocent man," they declared.

Meanwhile, Matt kept as cool as possible. He could readily see that, surrounded as he was, an attempt at escape would be suicidal. Many of the men were crack shots and would not have hesitated a moment to fire on him had he started to run.

Beane, the mountaineer, was still in favor of swinging the stranger. The outlaws had fired his barn and stolen two of his horses but two months before, and he was particularly aggrieved over the affair.

"Got ter make an example," he growled. "I'm sure this fellow belongs to the gang, no matter what Billy says. He means well, but he's too tender-hearted."

"And you mean well but you're too hasty," retorted the tavern-keeper.

"Well, what's to be done?" questioned an elderly man. "We can't stand talking here all night."

"I say hold the boy till morning," responded Banter, "and in the mean time see if some one can't find a trace of the young lady."

After much talking, and to the disgust of Rube Beane, Wilkinson, Foley and several others, Banter's advice was carried out.

Matt was to be held in custody until the following day, when a review and decision of his case should take place at the tavern at noon.

The elderly man, Major Wimby, was given charge of the prisoner. The major had a substantial barn upon his place, and with the aid of his hired man promised to bind Matt and keep strict watch over him.

Two men helped to escort him to the so-called jail. It was not a great distance from the tavern, and stood but a rod or so from the river bank.

In one corner of the building was a harness-room, partitioned off from the rest, and, after having his hands and feet tied, he was placed in this and the door locked upon him.

"Sure he's safe now until he's wanted?" asked one of the men, anxiously. "I wouldn't go in for giving him any show if I wasn't certain of it."

"You can rest easy on that score," replied Major Wimby. "He can't untie himself very well, and even if he could Sam or I will be at the door so he can't get out. Oh, he's safe enough, never fear."

With these words of assurance the men were satisfied. They returned to the tavern, and after a brief consultation, a dozen or more of the crowd dispersed to find some clue of the missing girl.

Banter was among them. For some unaccountable reason he had taken a strange liking to Matt, and the object of his search was not only to find Stella Dinsmore, but to clear our hero from the terrible charge brought against him.

With a friend he started up toward the road that led to the Haunted Mill. Since old Pop Brown's ghastly death he had not been near the place, but now both he and his friend were determined to pass, if not even to enter it.

Beane and his followers took the upper road. They had no heart in their undertaking, being confident that the supposed companion of Matt had long ere this made good his escape.

"Boys," exclaimed the mountaineer, suddenly, "we're a set of darned fools, that's what we are."

"Jest what I say," chimed in Wilkinson.

"Here we let that boy rest in peace when we know he's guilty."

"Jest so," put in Foley.

"Now, a little torture might make him tell us some things worth knowing. He knows

where his pard has gone with that gal. If we wait till to-morrow he may tell, but who knows but that may be too late. If he lets on to-night, we may ketch the chap."

"Ke-rect, Rube," broke in a fourth man. "'Strike while the iron's hot,' is my motto allers."

"What do you say to us going back and forcing him to tell what he knows?"

"I'm willing."

"Jest the thing."

"Billy Banter means well but he ain't up to the times," added Beane.

"No, indeed. We'll get it out of the boy, see if we don't, before they git back, too," said Foley.

A minute later the party had turned and were on their way to Major Wimby's farm.

CHAPTER IX.

ESCAPING BY THE RIVER.

THE room in which the young detective was confined was not large, and having but one small window, near the top, the air in it was almost stifling.

Matt had been bound hand and foot, and in such an expert manner that escape seemed impossible.

When he had been thrust in, the rays of Major Wimby's lantern had revealed several saddles piled up in the corner. Upon these Matt took a seat and began to speculate upon his situation.

His efforts to do a worthy deed had only resulted in a most disastrous failure. Instead of rescuing Stella Dinsmore from the ruffian who had abducted her, he had only succeeded in casting a suspicion upon himself that bid fair to result in dire disaster.

He appreciated Banter's efforts in his behalf, but he knew too well the spirit of such men as Beane and his followers. They might wait, under compulsion, until the following day, but they would give him the benefit of no doubt in the trial for his life.

It was not long before he meditated escape from his prison, escape not only on his own behalf but in order to follow up the abductor of the young lady in whom he took such a great interest. Every moment, he realized, was precious.

Major Wimby's man was a short, stout and good-natured darky, named Sam.

In order to find out what sort of a fellow he was, Matt began a conversation with him, in which Sam, who was on guard for two hours, readily joined.

Matt found the colored man a kind-hearted individual, and thoroughly devoted to his master. He was sorry to see Matt in his present position, but was "sart'in dat de major would fix it up all right in de mo'nin'."

The door of the room was fastened by a padlock on the outside, and Sam sat on a stool beside the door, ready to stop any outbreak that the prisoner might make.

In vain Matt tried to break his bonds or twist his hands free. His captors had done their work well, and he only succeeded in chafing his skin until the blood ran.

Finally an idea struck him. It was a desperate one, but in his present position he was willing to run many chances.

"Say, Sam," he said, after a pause.

"Well, sar?"

"It's fearfully hot in here. Can't you give me a drink?"

The colored guard scratched his head.

"Dunno," he replied. "W'at yer want? Whisky?"

"No; only some water. Bring me a pitcherful, and I'll pay you for it."

"Thirsty, is yer?"

"Terribly. Any one would be in a hole like this."

"Reckon yuse right. I've sweat dar many a time cleanin' de horses' trappin's."

"Will you do it?"

"Ya-as."

The well was but a few steps from the

barn. Certainly there would be no harm in leaving the door to go that distance. Taking up a kettle, Sam went to get the water.

Here was the chance Matt had hoped for. Bound as he was, he threw his whole weight against the door.

For an instant the lock held. Then there was a snap, the staple and hasp flew from their fastenings and the door sprung open.

Matt jumped out. Bound as he was, he could do nothing else. Three jumps more, and he was outside of the building.

But now Sam became aware that something he had not calculated on had happened, and came running up to see what it was.

"By the great 'possum, ef he ain't got loose!" he cried. "Hah, you! W'ot you mean by sech tricks?"

He made a dive for Matt, who in turn gave the darky a rap that sent him rolling to the ground.

"Help! help!" he called, loudly. "De prisoner am gettin' away!"

Matt knew that his cry would soon bring assistance to the spot. He waited no longer, but began jumping and hopping toward the river.

He was still fifty feet from it, with Sam in hot pursuit, when a clatter of horses' hoofs upon the road was heard and Beane and his men dashed up.

"Just in time, boys!" he cried. "That fool of a nigger has let the chap out. After him!"

Instantly all hands dismounted and came running down the yard, Major Wimby also appearing from the house.

Meanwhile Matt was making herculean efforts to reach the stream. Twice he tumbled headlong over the rocks, nearly dislocating his shoulder. But he paid no attention to the injury, and in ten seconds more reached the river-bank and sprang boldly into the swiftly-running water.

A howl arose on the shore, followed by several random shots, which did not touch him.

"He sha'n't escape!" cried Beane. "We must go after him. Come along, every one who can swim."

Matt heard no more. The current was running strongly, and soon swept him far beyond Major Wimby's place.

Matt was an expert swimmer; yet, bound as he was, he found that all he could do was to keep his head above water. Fearful of striking some obstruction, he floated along feet first.

Presently he came in contact with some hard substance. It proved to be a big log, and lying on top of it the youth found floating much easier.

Onward he swept through the darkness. If he was being followed, he did not know it. Over to the left he saw every now and then a light twinkle forth, and he rightly guessed each shone from some house in Danville.

With the log to bear him up, he essayed again to reach the shore. His progress toward the bank was slow, and it was only pure grit that kept him from giving up in despair.

At length when he was less than ten feet from the bank the log struck a snag. The shock was so severe that it threw Matt headlong into the water.

When he arose he found himself close to an old water-wheel. With an effort he scrambled from the water and sat upon a board platform close beside the wheel.

"Hello!" he exclaimed to himself. "I'll bet the tide has carried me to that very Haunted Mill that Banter spoke of. Well, if it has I guess I'm safe for they won't dare to look for me here."

Matt did not believe in ghosts, so the knowledge of being in a place reputed to be haunted did not disturb him. Having somewhat regained his breath, he set diligently to work to gain the free use of his limbs.

On the old wheel were several pieces of rusty iron, and by scraping the cord that bound his wrists over these, he soon succeeded in severing the bond.

His hands free he was not slow to untie his feet, and then with an exclamation of satisfaction he sprang up.

"Free once more!" he thought. "Now to find the abductor of Miss Dinsmore, save the young lady, and clear my name from suspicion."

He paused to think over the situation. Where had Conomo gone with his fair prisoner? When he had last seen the assassin he was coming in this direction. Had he taken to the mountains or—

Idaho Matt stopped short. Perhaps the murderer of his father had come to this very spot. The outlaw would certainly know that no better hiding-place than the Haunted Mill could be found. Every one shunned the spot, and many could not have been hired to come near it under any consideration.

"If he is in the vicinity I must be careful," thought Matt. "I will climb to the upper floor and take a quiet look around."

In the pitch darkness under the wheel-shed it was no easy matter to move around. It was several minutes before Matt found the ladder that led to the floor above, and even then it was so old and rickety that he was almost afraid to trust his weight upon it.

Finally he reached the room above. As he did so he fancied he heard footsteps, and an instant later came a sudden jar as of a heavy weight falling into place.

CHAPTER X.

THE PICTURE ON THE WALL.

FOR an instant Matt was startled.

Had he really heard footsteps, and what was that heavy sound that had followed?

He listened intently.

Not a sound followed.

"I'd wager all I've got I heard some one walk across the floor of the next room," he said to himself. "Wonder what that noise was? Sounded a little as if it might be a heavy door slamming."

He kept perfectly quiet for several minutes longer. But nothing further reached his ears.

"If I was superstitious I would say it was ghosts. But ghosts don't scare me for a cent. Just let me get a hold of one, that's all."

He was sorry that he had no weapon—he would have felt much safer with a pistol or a knife in his hand.

Groping around in the darkness he came upon some old ironware in the corner. It was portions of worn-out mill machinery, and among it he found an iron bar two feet long and half an inch thick, with a nut at either end.

He thought the bar would make a good club, and grasping it firmly in his hand, he threw open the door of the next room.

This apartment was the one containing the trap door leading to the secret passage.

What Matt had heard was simply Corkey's descent and the closing of the opening.

The room was as dark as the other had been with the exception that the outer door stood partly open, showing dimly the road beyond.

As Matt walked toward the door his foot kicked against an object lying upon the floor.

He picked it up. It was a belt.

Going to the dim light outside he examined it carefully.

He was much agitated.

It was a lady's belt, and by its peculiar buckle he recognized it as one Stella Dinsmore had worn.

Beyond a doubt she had been brought to this place.

"She's around here somewhere," he de-

clared to himself. "I'll find her if I have to search a week."

In one corner of his pocket he found a couple of matches—the only thing that had escaped detection when he was searched.

At a great risk he lit one of the matches and then a bit of paper, and with this light searched the floor carefully for more evidence.

Nothing more was to be found.

Before the light went out, he located on a steps leading to the loft and went up the tour of inspection.

Everything was as old Pop Brown had left it.

His kitchen still contained a small cooking-stove, several chairs, a table and a number of culinary utensils.

On the little table stood a lamp containing considerable oil, and, striking his remaining match, Matt soon made the lamp burn as if it had been in constant use instead of standing idle for over two years.

With the light he examined his surroundings. He was sure that nothing had been touched for a long time.

In a closet he found a small sword, rusty, but of good steel. As a weapon he considered it superior to the iron bar, and thrust it into his belt.

The next room had been old Brown's bed-chamber. The bed still lay as it had been left, and the old man's clothing lay scattered about as had been his wont to leave them.

On the wall hung a picture, back outwards. Beneath it was the inscription:

"Honor thy father, and cursed be she who does not."

Prompted by curiosity, Matt turned the face of the picture so he might see it.

Then he gave a wild cry.

The portrait was one of his own mother.

It represented her as she must have looked before she was married.

What did it mean?

His mother's maiden name had been Ruth Nelson. She had been an orphan, and—

"Yes, yes; he remembered now. She had been adopted by a man named Brown, a mean man, so she had once told Matt, who wanted her to marry a man she did not care for, and who had driven her away from home when she refused.

This Brown must have been that same man, and the daughter Banter had mentioned had probably been his mother.

This was the house, or mill, in which his mother had passed so many years of her life. Which room had been hers? Perhaps some tokens of her maidenhood still remained.

With the lamp in his hand, Matt moved swiftly around the room, taking in everything that was to be seen.

Beyond the bed-chamber was another apartment. Matt was just upon the point of opening it, when a noise below startled him.

Hastily setting down the lamp, he made his way to the head of the steps and listened. He fancied he heard the voices of two men in low, but earnest conversation, and at the risk of being discovered he started to go down, when the door below was cautiously opened and a man began to ascend.

Matt instantly shrunk to one side.

The man came up slowly, followed by another.

As the light fell upon the first man's face our hero uttered an exclamation.

It was Billy Banter.

"Who's there?" demanded the tavern-keeper, pointing his weapon.

"Only me, Banter," replied Matt.

His appearance to Banter and the other man, named Arden, was equally astonishing.

"Idaho Matt!" ejaculated the tavern-keeper. "How under the sun did you get here?"

"Thought you was tied up in Major Wimby's barn," added Arden.

Matt's story was soon told. Both men listened in amazement.

"Wal, you're down-right plucky," declared Banter.

"So he is," said Arden. "And they can't tell me he's guilty any more."

Banter had but little to tell. Neither he nor Arden had discovered anything unusual about the place saving the light that had caused them to enter.

"But I'm positive the man is somewhere about here," insisted Matt. "It is just the kind of a retreat such a fellow would come to."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Banter.

"Hang around until something turns up."

Arden had a lantern and he proposed that they make a thorough search of the place. Matt and Banter readily consented, and it was begun at once.

But, though they searched high and low nothing new was discovered.

"I reckon we'll take a look outside," said Banter as they stood in the millshed.

"And I'll go up-stairs and take a look into that back room," rejoined Matt. "We can meet down-stairs in, say a quarter of an hour."

This was agreed to, and they separated.

Passing through the lower room, Matt ascended the stairs. The lamp still stood where he had left it, and he was about to take it up when a slight noise startled him.

What had it been? Perhaps Banter or Arden outside. He paused and listened.

"Oh, pshaw, I'm getting nervous," he muttered to himself. "The least little sound sets me on edge. Certainly, this isn't a very cheerful place, but that is no reason for getting chicken-hearted."

Again he was about to take up the lamp, and again the sound disturbed him.

It came from the lower room. With the sword in his hand he ran down the steps and opened the door.

As he did so he received a terrific blow on the forehead. He staggered out upon the floor, and tried to defend himself.

Another blow followed, and half unconscious he sunk to the floor.

He felt a gag being placed in his mouth. Then he was lifted up and dragged to an opening.

He felt himself rolling down a flight of stone steps, and knew no more.

CHAPTER XI.

THE UNDERGROUND STREAM.

"Who is it, captain?"

"The boy you said you had killed."

"What!"

"Exactly, Corkey."

"Ain't he dead?"

"He may be now; but he was the liveliest kind of a corpse a few minutes ago."

"You don't mean it, captain?"

"Yes, I do," replied Conomo, sternly. "What did you mean by saying you had shot him through the heart when you hadn't even touched it?"

"He dropped forward like a shot when I fired," pleaded Corkey. "And his horse ran off with him a clingin' to his back in a reg'lar death-grip."

"Guess you were drinking too much, Corkey," returned the assassin, coldly.

"Not a drop, captain."

"What!"

"Well, maybe not just that, but not more'n a glass or two."

"Nonsense! you're guzzling all the time! Here, catch hold of his legs and help carry him."

Matt lay at the foot of the stone steps like one dead. From a wound in his forehead the blood ran down over his face. He was white as marble, and scarcely breathed.

"What yer going to do, captain—chuck him in the river?"

"No."

"No?" Corkey's voice evinced considerable surprise. "It's the easiest way ter git him out of the way."

"I've changed my mind. Now, as he is in my power, I want to have a talk with him. Come, catch ahold."

Conomo grasped Matt under the arms as he spoke. Without further words Corkey did as he had been directed, and together the two men bore their burden down the passage-way.

"Hello, what's this?" exclaimed Doodle, who was still on guard.

"A prisoner," replied Conomo. "The fellow who killed Ranvelt."

"By guns, you don't say so!" cried the old man. "Putty young, ain't he?"

"Yes, young but dangerous. Give me the key to the dripping cave."

Doodle started back.

"You ain't going ter put him in thar be you?"

"That is my intention."

"But, captain—"

"Stop! I know my business. Give me the key."

Without another word Doodle handed over an immense brass key.

"Has any one else a key?" demanded Conomo.

"Ranvelt had one."

"Humph! Well, that's gone. Come on, Corkey. And, Doodle?"

"Yes, sir."

"If any of the boys want to go out, tell them to be very careful as there are prowlers around. They had better not use the trap at all."

"I will, captain."

The men passed to the end of the passage. Then the middle door of the circular chamber was opened, revealing a winding way between the rocks.

A hundred feet further, and a massive oaken door barred their progress. Conomo unlocked it, and held up the lantern which his assistant had brought.

"Nice place," remarked Corkey, with a shudder.

"Good enough for him," replied the assassin, grimly. "Here, just lay him down on the floor."

"Is he alive yet?"

"Guess he is. If he isn't no matter. You can go. Leave me the lantern."

With another shiver Corkey departed at once.

"Captain has got a cross streak on him to-night," he muttered to himself. "Reckon the gal ain't as agreeable as he wants her ter be."

Meanwhile Conomo leaned over and put his hand on Matt's heart.

It still beat faintly.

"He's alive true enough, and will be all right by morning," he growled. "I suppose he ought to have a bandage over those cuts, but hang me if I'll put one on. Curse him! How I hate them all! Father, son and mother! But he is the last, ha! ha! the last, and Conomo is the winner!"

With a sardonic laugh, the assassin arose and went out of the door, locking it carefully, and hiding the key in a niche of the wall.

Where was he?

This was the first thought that crossed Matt's mind as slowly and painfully he came to his senses.

All was pitch dark around him. The only sound that broke the stillness was the dripping of water that ever and anon splashed down upon him.

His forehead was terribly swollen. The wounds had ceased bleeding. Near him was a pool of water, and from this he took a drink and then washed his face.

The cooling liquid was highly refreshing,

yet so weak was he from the rough handling he had received, that it was fully quarter of an hour before he arose to his feet.

At length, after several attempts, he managed to rise and staggered forward. He had gone but a few feet before he came in contact with the oaken door.

After trying vainly to open it, he started on a tour of inspection of his prison, for such he realized it must be.

The tour was easily made. The chamber was nothing more nor less than a slit in the rocks. It was three or four yards wide, by twelve or fifteen long. Its height he had no means of knowing. From overhead dripped continually cold spring water that ran into a small stream to the left. The floor, of rough stone, was perfectly bare, and after Matt had learned all this he sat down upon it to think over his situation.

He did not doubt for an instant that he had been brought to the place by Conomo. This being so, the chamber was probably situated under the old mill. The murderer of his father now had our hero in his power. What would he do with him?

From his own situation Matt's mind soon passed on to Stella Dinsmore. He had every reason to believe that she must be close at hand. Had she been confined in such a horrible place as this?

The thought made him shiver from head to foot. He well knew what a shock to her nerves such a hardship would be.

The imagination of such an event made him jump up with sudden energy.

"I'll not give in yet!" he cried to himself. "Conomo thinks he has me like a rat in a trap, but he shall find out his mistake. I mean to fight it out to the bitter end. Courage, Matt, courage!"

He began a fresh examination of the four walls that held him. As before, he found no opening of any kind.

He got down on his hands and knees and examined the stream of water. It was not over two feet wide and scarcely a foot deep.

"I wonder where it goes to?" he thought. "It must run somewhere."

Apparently it made its descent directly under the wall of the cavern. Matt thrust his arm in as far as he was able, and found that it grew a few inches higher just beyond, so that a man lying upon his back could, by raising his head, keep his face out of water.

"I'll get into it and follow it up a ways," was his determination. "I can't get any wetter than I am, and if I get stuck it will be easy enough to back out."

So lying down on his back in the stream he thrust his head under the stone wall. For a second it was submerged, and then he pulled up on the other side.

His progress along the hollow was necessarily slow.

Once or twice when the passage became extra low he was about to give up and go back, but each time this happened an indefinite something spurred him on.

Finally, he came to what appeared to be a solid wall, and the stream seemed to go down.

"That settles it," he groaned. "All these efforts for nothing. Now to work my way back."

He was about to make an attempt to turn around when a faint ray of light struck his eye. He looked up, and saw an opening to his right.

"Hello, here's a way out!" he exclaimed to himself. "Wonder where it leads to?"

As he spoke the sounds of two voices broke upon his ears.

CHAPTER XII.

MATT TO THE RESCUE.

NEVER in all her life had Stella Dinsmore felt so down-hearted as when she threw herself on the cot in her prison under the Haunted Mill.

Many were the tears that she shed as she lay face downward upon the cot. How long the flood lasted she never knew.

So intense was her grief that she did not notice the door open.

"Asleep?" asked the gruff voice of Conomo.

Somewhat startled, she sprung up, and then, seeing who the intruder was, sunk slowly into a sitting position.

"Asleep!" she exclaimed, in deep scorn.

"Did you expect it?"

"Well, hardly. I suppose you're all worked up yet. That's the reason I thought I'd come back instead of waiting till morning."

"Why have you brought me here?"

"I told you before that you should know all in good time. Why don't you let that content you?"

"Because I don't choose to. You have no right to bring me here and keep me a prisoner."

"Gently, my pretty! Out in these regions might often makes right," replied the abductor, closing the door carefully, and taking a seat beside her.

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"Make you mind me for one thing."

"Never," returned Stella, firmly.

"Yes, you will."

"I say no. I defy you."

"Phew, what a temper you have! Well, I like a woman with a little spunk in her. Here, sit down, I want to talk to you."

He caught her and forced her into a seat beside him.

"What do you think of me?" he went on, after a pause. "Am I distasteful to you?"

"Indeed you are!" she said, shortly.

"Mr. Dinsmore was your guardian?" he said, changing the subject.

"Was?" she repeated.

"Yes," he returned, hastily. "I mean before I brought you away."

His slip had almost made her suspect the truth.

"Yes."

"Your folks are dead?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I want to know."

"Suppose I refuse to answer?"

"You ought not to. It is a simple question, and the less you thwart me the easier will be your position here."

Stella gave a shiver.

"Yes, my folks are all dead," she said.

"And how much property does your guardian hold for you?"

"Why? Are you after a ransom?"

"Never mind. Tell me at once!"

"About three hundred thousand dollars." Conomo's eyes glistened. Nearly a third of a million!

"This may yet turn out a very profitable night's work," he muttered to himself.

"What is your guardian?"

"A lawyer."

"In business alone?"

"No."

"What is the firm?"

"Dinsmore & Fiske."

"Fiske?"

Conomo's face turned ashy pale.

"Yes."

"Wh-what is this Fiske's other name?" he gasped.

"Robert II."

"It is the same!" murmured the assassin to himself. "How fate turns circumstances around!"

"Do you know Mr. Fiske?" asked Stella, with some curiosity.

"Perhaps I do. What is the address?"

"Wainwright Building."

Conomo took out a greasy memorandum-book and made a note of it.

"If you are a good girl I may let you write a letter to Mr. Fiske to-morrow."

"A letter? What for?"

"You'll know when you write it."

"Why not write to Mr. Dinsmore?"

"You'll know that, too. Now I'm going to leave you. You will be perfectly safe here, and I advise you to take it as comfortably as possible. Nothing will harm you."

As Conomo concluded he caught the fair girl around the waist, and attempted to hold her to his breast.

"Unhand her, you dirty scoundrel!"

It was Matt who spoke.

Dripping with water, he had entered the place just in the nick of time.

Springing forward he snatched the pistol from Conomo's belt and aimed it at the outlaw's head.

"Touch her again or make the least cry and you are a dead man!" he added.

Conomo was taken completely off his guard. He loosed his hold upon his victim and staggered back against the wall.

For a second Stella did not realize who the intruder was. Then she recognized him.

"Idaho Matt!" she ejaculated in joy. "Oh, thank God that you have come!"

And she sprung forward and caught his arm warmly.

"How did you get here?" asked Conomo.

"That is my business," responded Matt, coolly. "You thought you had me dead to rights, but I am not so easily downed as you think. Stop where you are. Throw up your hands!"

For the assassin had made two movements—one toward the door and another as if to blow a whistle.

"Curse you, boy!" he hissed, in his disappointment.

"Ay, you would do that willingly, you assassin!"

"Do you know the man?" asked Stella.

"Indeed I do. His name is Henry Conomo. He murdered my father."

"It's a lie!" cried Conomo, deadly white.

"And also Mr. Dinsmore," went on Matt without thinking.

"Mr. Dinsmore!" cried Stella. "Is my guardian dead? Oh, heavens! what a monster!"

And laying her head on Matt's arm, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

"It is not true!" quivered Conomo.

"It is."

"You have no proof."

"We have—your stiletto—the same that you stole from my father when you killed him."

Coward that he was, Conomo hung his head when the proof of his guilt stared him in the face.

"You will save me?" whispered Stella, through her tears.

"Either that, or die with you," responded Matt, in a low tone.

"What will you do with him?" she asked.

"I hardly know. Do you know where this place is?"

"Under the mountains. We came to it by a long passageway that ends at a trap-door in the floor of the mill."

"Then I will disarm this man and make him march before us, and so make our escape," said Matt.

"No, no, you cannot do that."

"Why not?"

"There are armed men in the passage."

"We must overpower them," he said. "It is our only chance. Now, first to render this fellow harmless."

While Matt covered Conomo with the pistol, Stella searched the assassin, taking away a knife, another pistol and the key to the door.

Then the outlaw was bound hand and foot to the cot, and a gag placed in his mouth.

After this the light was extinguished, and they stepped out into the dark passageway, closing and locking the door behind them.

"Now keep close to me and make as little noise as possible," cautioned Matt. "We have a dangerous task before us, and discovery may mean death!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE HAUNTED MILL.

IDAHO MATT had indeed a difficult task before him. Members of Conomo's gang might pounce down upon him and his fair charge at any moment.

Yet the brave youth did not falter. With Stella Dinsmore in his care, it was to him either success or death.

All was silent as the two stepped into the passageway. Matt judged it must be getting toward morning, yet none of the outlaws seemed to be stirring.

"Do you know the way?" whispered Matt to the girl at his side.

She nodded.

"I will go first," she said, in a low tone.

Crouching close to the wall, they proceeded in the direction of the Haunted Mill.

Suddenly Stella stopped, and pointed ahead.

By the rays of a lantern overhead both saw a man sitting on a box, gun in hand.

It was a new guard who had, within the last half-hour, relieved the old man, Doodle.

He was a tall, muscular-looking fellow, with rather a noble-looking face. He appeared to take but little interest in his task.

While the two watched the man took a careless glance up and down the passage, and, seeing no one, he put down his gun, took up the newspaper Doodle had left, and began to read.

Holding up a hand to warn Stella to silence, Matt took the lead. Trembling with agitation, the girl followed.

The passage at this point was not over nine feet wide. Could they pass the guard without being discovered?

Slowly and with extreme caution they moved forward. Two minutes more—it seemed like an age—and they were directly opposite the inattentive guard.

Suddenly Stella stubbed her toe, and as her feet were bare, the accident caused her to utter a sigh of pain.

Instantly the guard dropped the paper and reached for his gun, but Matt was too quick for him. Securing the gun with his left hand, with the other he presented his pistol at the guard's head.

"Make the least outcry and you are a dead man!" he exclaimed, in a low but incisive tone.

The man had been about to cry out an alarm, but the threat kept him silent.

"Now answer my questions," continued Matt. "Is there any one else near?"

"No," replied the overawed man.

"How far is it to the trap door?"

"About two hundred feet."

"Is it open?"

"No."

"Locked?"

"Yes."

"Who has the key?"

For an instant the man hesitated.

"Come! no fooling, unless you want a bullet through your brain."

"Who are you?" asked the guard.

"Never mind that. Answer my question."

"I have it."

"Is there any one between here and the door?"

"I guess not."

"Then lead the way to it. But make no noise."

The guard turned pale.

"It's as much as my life is worth," he pleaded.

"And it's death to refuse," returned Matt calmly. "Come, lead on!"

The man might have refused longer, but one look into his captor's face convinced him that the boy meant all he said.

So he led the way along the passage to the stone stairway.

"Get up and unlock the door," commanded Matt. "Be quick!"

In a minute the trap-door was unfastened and thrown back.

"Now, out you go."

"Me?"

"Yes; but don't dare to run away if you value your miserable existence."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"You'll know in good time."

"Turn me over to the authorities?"

"You'll soon see. Is there any other way out of this place?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Way up the mountains; but it's a mighty hard road. Nobody uses it."

Matt was glad to hear this.

"See that pile of old machinery in the corner?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I want you to get to work and pile it up over that trap-door."

"All right, boss; I'm willing," grinned the man. "If I'm to be caught I'd just as lief have the rest of the crowd too. Darn me if I owe them any good will!"

"Why not?"

"'Cause they don't treat me right. They expect me to do all the hard and dangerous work and take the smallest share of the gains. Between you and I, I was just about getting ready to cut the crowd."

"What is your name?"

"Jack Smart."

Stella pulled the boy's sleeve.

"I think he speaks the truth," she whispered, "because I heard another one of the men tell Conomo that Smart was no longer to be trusted."

"You say you were about to leave the gang?"

"Yes, that I was."

"Then, maybe, if you do the right thing, I'll make things easier for you," returned Matt. "I intend to do all in my power to bring Conomo to justice and wipe this den out."

"I'll do whatever you say," rejoined Jack Smart, eagerly. "I'm sick of the hull business, and I don't care if every one of 'em swings to-morrow, so long as I save my own neck."

"Then do as I want you to and I may save your life."

"I will, colonel, I will, and here's my hand on it."

"Never mind shaking hands. Go on with that work."

The outlaw had spoken honestly enough, but in this wild region Matt always held to the motto: "Hold every man an enemy until he proves himself a friend."

"You're young, colonel, very young," continued Smart, as he piled the heavy pieces of iron upon the door, "but you look powerful, very powerful, and you air pretty level-headed I take it. Do you mind giving me the proper handle now?"

"I am called Idaho Matt."

"Idaho Matt? Reckon I heard that name before. Ever been in Idaho?"

"Yes; I came from there less than two months ago."

"That's where I heard it then. I was out there. Joined Conomo there—just before he kem here."

"Were you in the Blue Gulch raid?"

"No; heard Conomo speak of it, though. I heard tell that he killed a man there and robbed him of his nuggets."

"He did; murdered him in cold blood."

"How do you know?"

"The man was my own father."

"Phew! Reckon you're after the captain's scalp."

"I shall not rest until he is dead or I am. How many of you are here?"

"Twelve."

"Including yourself and Conomo?"

"Yes. Pyler is here, too."

"Who is he?"

"He's the city agent."

"The city agent?" repeated Matt, somewhat puzzled.

"Exactly."

"What does he do?"

"Why, he finds a market for the stuff."

"What stuff?"

"What stuff?" repeated Smart, stopping in his work, and gazing at the boy in astonishment. "Don't you know what's going on down there?"

Matt was about to reply in the negative when he suddenly stopped himself.

"Of course, but I want to know just what Pyler does," he said, cautiously.

"Well, he takes all the queer stuff we print and sells it to some friends in New York and Philadelphia for from twenty to thirty per cent. of its face value."

Here was a revelation!

The outlaws were nothing more nor less than a band of counterfeiters.

The stone chambers under the Haunted Mill were a counterfeiters' den!

He knew well that such a gang was known to exist somewhere within the borders of the State, but none of the authorities had been able to locate the place.

"How much counterfeit money do you turn out?" the lad asked.

"From fifty to a hundred thousand dollars' worth a month," was Smart's reply.

"There, that's done. I reckon."

"You're right. Now come on."

"Where are you going to take me?"

"To Danville."

"To lock me up?"

"Guess I'll have to. But you can turn state's evidence, if you want to."

"All right," answered Smart, seemingly quite content.

But he was far from satisfied. The law was all well enough, but in such a place as this, who cared for the law? The people would hang him on the first tree if they got the notion.

Suddenly he gave Matt a shove that sent the boy sprawling over the pile of iron.

Then he made a spring for the door, and dashed out, followed by a bullet from Stella's pistol, which, however, did no harm.

The shove sent the young detective down in such a manner that his head struck violently.

Instantly the wounds in his forehead opened afresh, and for a moment he lay stunned.

At the same time a violent pounding began on the under side of the trap-door.

CHAPTER XIV.

AGAIN IN THE OUTLAWS' CLUTCH.

"Oh, Matt! are you hurt?" exclaimed Stella, as she sprung forward and bent over the prostrate form.

"Not seriously," he muttered, with a deep sigh of pain. "My head has felt bad all along, and this crack has made it worse; but I'll be all right in a little while. "Where is that guard?"

"He ran away."

"Too bad; he may— Hark!"

The noise under him attracted his attention.

"Some one is trying the door!" he cried. "It must be one of the men. Listen!"

There was a pounding and a pushing for fully a minute; then the voice of old man Doodle was heard.

"Blast the ornery door!" he exclaimed.

"It's unfastened; then why don't the plaguy thing open? Hello, Smart! where are you?"

Matt motioned Stella to silence.

"Guess I'll get a pry and call some of the others," went on Doodle, talking to himself.

"Something is wrong here."

And they heard him descend the steps.

"They will discover all in a moment," cried the girl in terror. "What shall we do?"

Had Matt thought only of himself and the rescue of Stella Dinsmore, he would have retreated from the place at once.

But even in this trying moment the boy did not falter from his duty. Here were a band of outlaws, criminals of the worst type, among them the murderer of his father. It was his plain duty to do all in his power to hand them over to justice.

"How I wish Banter and the others were here!" he said. "We could easily bag the lot of them."

"It is your wish to make them prisoners?"

"Yes."

"Do you think they can open the door very soon?"

"No. They don't know what the matter is, and it may take them quite a while to find out."

"How far is it to Danville?"

"About a mile, I believe."

A look of determination came into the girl's face.

"Then hurry for assistance," she said. "I will stay here and watch the door."

"You!" exclaimed Matt, starting back in surprise.

"Yes. I'll promise that the murderer of your father shall not escape. I have his pistol, and will shoot him on sight."

"But they will soon overpower you."

"I think not. The pistol contains five charges, and I will try to make every one tell. If they succeed in opening the door wide enough to get out I will run for it. I think I know the road."

"And you want me to go after help while you guard the door?"

"Yes. And God speed you."

For a second Matt paused.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed. "Here, take both pistols. I will do without one. Shoot the first man you catch sight of."

"I will. Now hurry."

Matt waited not an instant longer. He dashed through the door and up the road that led to Danville.

The first gray streaks of the early dawn were beginning to show themselves, lighting up the way considerably.

Matt was a good runner, and he tore over the stony ground like the wind.

On and on he went until, in less than ten minutes the tavern appeared in the distance.

"I trust Banter and Arden have returned," he thought. "They will go back with me at once, I know."

Suddenly four men dashed out from a side road upon him.

They were Rube Beane and his followers.

"Here's luck, boys!" cried the mountaineer. "Jest the chap we was looking for."

In a moment Matt was compelled to halt.

"Yer thought to get away but yer made a big mistake," said Beane, as he grasped the boy by the shoulder.

"Let me go," cried Matt. "I have caught the outlaw who ran off with Miss Dinsmore. She is guarding him and his gang now, down in the Haunted Mill."

"Too thin, boy. Where is the gal?"

"Down to the Haunted Mill. Where is Banter and Arden?"

"Don't know. But we've got you and that's enough," put in Wilkinson.

"Don't be fools," insisted Matt. "I'm telling you the truth. If you'll come with me you will find Miss Dinsmore at old Brown's mill."

Our hero's speech was somewhat jumbled.

Evidently the men did not believe one word that he said.

In vain he tried to explain.

"You're a slippery Dick, but you can't fool us any more," observed Beane. "You'll swing soon."

"Will you come to the mill with me?" he pleaded.

"It's haunted—nobody goes there," said Foley, with a perceptible shiver.

"Nonsense. It's the hang-out for the biggest band of outlaws in the State. Come along and I will prove it."

There was a pause.

"If the boy speaks the truth it's only a trick to get us there," said Wilkinson. "His friends will be waiting to rescue him and give us a warm reception."

"You're right," cried Beane. "The idea of him rescuing the girl, when he dropped into the river only a few hours ago bound hand and foot! It's too thin."

"It's the truth. See, I am defenseless. Go to the mill alone if you wish, and if you don't find Miss Dinsmore there keeping the outlaws prisoners, and if she does not admit that I did all I could to help her escape, then put a bullet through my heart."

This plain proposition could not help but carry weight.

"We'll do it," said Beane. "Foley, you keep in the rear with him, and if there is the least sign of wrong, put a bullet in him as he said."

"I will, never fear," replied Foley.

"But lose no time," cautioned Matt. "Every moment counts."

In a second his hands were tied in front of him and he was placed on Foley's steed, the owner himself, with pistol in hand, sitting directly behind him.

The horses were not long in reaching the spot where the road branched into two.

Here a brief consultation among the men made them dismount and tie their horses to a tree.

"Now cautious, boys," said Beane. "We don't want to run into any trap. My private opinion is that the boy is lying, but as we have come so far we might as well go through with it. If we don't find anything about the mill we'll soon have the boy on a tree."

With these words the mountaineer moved forward. The others followed, Foley with his charge bringing up the rear.

Matt's heart beat high. How had brave Stella Dinsmore fared during his brief absence?

Never for a moment did he dream that aught but his complete vindication would soon take place.

Stella would no doubt be found where he had left her, and a few words from her would not only set him free, but put to shame the men who had judged him guilty.

Presently the mill, now surrounded by a thick growth of rank vegetation, appeared in sight.

"Foley, you stay behind with the boy," said Beane. "Keep a sharp lookout or some one may steal up on you before you know it. Remember, you are responsible for the safe-keeping of the lad."

"You need have no fear on that score," replied Matt, with a cold smile. "My victory is too near at hand for me to run away. All I wish, and I ask it for Miss Dinsmore's sake, is that you waste no more precious time."

"Don't worry yourself," growled Beane, who did not fancy being talked to in this style. "I know my duty without being told it by a beardless boy."

Nevertheless, both he and his men moved forward more speedily.

For several seconds Matt was in an agony of suspense.

He saw Beane and the others make a complete circuit of the old mill.

Then they peered in at the windows, and finally entered the door.

A minute passed.

What was going on? Why did not Stella Dinsmore come out?

Grating his teeth with impatience, he waited, Foley keeping watch over him all the while.

At length Beane and his followers emerged from the mill.

They were alone.

"What does it mean?" groaned Matt to himself, with a sinking heart.

He was soon to learn.

"You confounded liar!" roared the mountaineer, striding up to him. "I didn't believe you from the start. There is no one in or near the mill."

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE DUG-OUT.

MATT could hardly believe his ears. No one in or near the mill! What did it mean? What had become of the fair girl he had left but a short half-hour before?

"You don't mean it!" he gasped.

"Yes, I do," responded Beane. "We were fools for ever swallowing any such story."

"Take me to the mill, will you?" asked the youth, earnestly.

At first the mountaineer demurred. What was the use? But at last, urged by one of the other men, he consented.

In the room all was exactly as Matt had left it, excepting that Stella Dinsmore was nowhere to be seen.

"That pile of machinery still lay on the trap-door, showing that the outlaws had not escaped."

"If you will help me to get this stuff out of the way, I will show you a strange cave under here," said Matt finally. "There are twelve outlaws here, and among them is the abductor of Miss Dinsmore."

Beane shook his head.

"I'm tired of believing you," he exclaimed. "If we were to do what you say, then you would want just one thing more done. Darn you, you're jest trying to gain time, that's what you're doing. But, as I said before, it's too thin. Come, boys, let's make short work of him, and then back to Danville."

"Now ye'r talkin', Rube!" exclaimed another of the men. "We've been wastin' altogether too much time on this chap. Up he goes, right in sight of the Haunted Mill!"

A long rope hung over the saddle-bow of the speaker's horse. The man was not long in getting it, and with the aid of several of the others the rope was quickly thrown over the limb of a tree.

Matt realized that his position was an extremely perilous one. In vain he tried to make the men listen to his story. They would hear nothing. They knew they were right, and that settled it.

Yet our hero had no idea of allowing these men to carry out their intention. He was innocent, and he meant to fight them to the last.

Near to the tree over which the rope had been placed browsed one of the horses. The rope which had held him had in some manner become loosed, and step by step he came nearer.

"There they are!" suddenly shouted the boy, pointing to the thicket beyond. "Watch out, they are surrounding us!"

This sudden cry was not without its effect. Every one of the party made a dive for some shelter. Foley let go his hold of Matt's arm and crouched behind a tree.

This was the opportunity which Matt wanted. Of course no outlaws were in sight. His cry had only been uttered to divert the men's attention.

With a gigantic leap he cleared the distance between the horse and himself. In an instant he was on the animal's back.

"Stop him!" roared Beane, when he saw how they had been fooled.

He and several others sprung forward, but it was too late.

Matt gave the horse a sharp crack on the flanks. The beast was a spirited one, and, giving a bound forward, tore down the road, the boy having all he could do to cling on.

Several shots were fired, one passing through Matt's hat and another grazing the horse, and thus serving only to increase his speed.

In the holster were a brace of pistols. One of these Matt quickly transferred to his belt, and took the other in his hand.

"Now if they catch me they will find my life dearly bought," he muttered to himself. "What a set of fools they are—that Beane especially!"

He looked back and saw that the men were already following him.

He did not know which way to go. By the actions of these men he concluded that, notwithstanding what Banter had said, the Danvilleites believed him guilty and wanted his life.

"It will never do to go there," he thought. "I must steer clear of the place until I can prove my innocence. I wonder what has become of Stella?"

Somehow his anxiety concerning the girl was greater than for himself.

If the outlaws had not overpowered her in the room at the Haunted Mill, and the indications seemed to prove as much, why had she not remained at her post?

At length he came to a spot where a narrow road led up to the mountains. Looking back he could see his pursuers far in the distance. He had evidently secured the best horse of the lot, and on a straight road it is doubtful if Beane and his men could have caught him.

Without hesitation Matt turned up the narrow path. He had not the slightest idea where it led to; his object was to throw his pursuers off the track, and then return to the Haunted Mill, and look for some trace of Stella Dinsmore.

The way led for some distance up the mountain-side, and then made an abrupt turn back, running nearly parallel to the other road.

This suited Matt. He knew that his pursuers could not very well pass through the rank undergrowth that intervened between the two roads, and the one that he was on being higher than the other, he was easily able, by standing up in his stirrups, to watch their progress.

This he did, and was gratified a little while later to see them not only pass him, but to continue on straight ahead to Danville.

With a feeling of relief he slackened the speed of his horse, who was covered with sweat by the violence of his galloping, and tried to think of what was best to do next.

Would it be advisable to return to the mill at once and alone? Might he not fall into some trap set by the outlaws?

He wondered what had become of Banter and his friend Arden, and also of the guard Smart.

By the turning of the road he knew it must lead close to where he wished to go, so he decided not to turn back but keep on until some path appeared that would take him down to the river-side.

As he rode along he espied, quite a distance further up the mountain, a rude dug-out from whose chimney the early morning smoke was pouring.

The many adventures through which Matt had gone since the previous evening had made the boy hungry and faint, and no sooner did he see the evidence of a fire than he thought of breakfast and realized that his appetite needed satisfying.

"Guess I'd better go and see if I can't get something to eat," he thought to himself. "It won't take much time, and goodness only knows when I'll get another chance to get a meal."

Tying up his horse he approached the door of the dug-out and knocked.

There was a hurried movement within.

Then the rough planking was shoved aside and the whitened face of a very old man appeared.

"What do you want?" he asked, in a not-unpleasant voice.

In a few brief words Matt explained his errand.

"Breakfast, eh? Wal, I reckon you kin have it, such as it is. We don't live high here, me and Susan don't. Do we Susan, my gal? Walk in, pilgrim, and make yerself ter hum. Susan's my wife, we've lived here nigh fifty years. Come from Missouri when we was married. I was twenty-eight and Susan she—"

"Sam Landers du stop your everlastin' jaw," broke in the woman, who looked even older than her husband.

"Yer tongue keeps a-goin' jest like the sails ov a wind-mill, only stopping fer the want of wind! Here, stranger, hav' a cheer. We'll have eatin' in a few minits. What's the news down ter Danville?"

In a few moments Matt was on good terms with the old couple, who seemed to be simple and honest folks. He told them of what had happened at Danville, omitting to add, however, that he was suspected of the crime.

"Hope they ketch the rascals," was Landers's comment. "Why can't everybody do as they oughter, without going around killing men and stealing off wimmin?"

Presently they sat down to a very plain but substantial breakfast. It is needless to say that our hero did full justice to all that was offered him.

At length Matt finished. He arose, thinking in what way he could best pay the old couple for their hospitality, when he happened to glance out of the only window in the place, and saw a man approaching.

He was nearly dumfounded to recognize Hank Conomo!

CHAPTER XVI.

A BLOODY DEED.

It was but natural that Matt should be intensely astonished at Hank Conomo's sudden appearance in the vicinity of the lonely dug-out.

When he had last seen the assassin of his father, Conomo had been bound hand and foot in the metal chamber of the counterfeiters under the Haunted Mill.

For an instant he thought he had not seen aright. He sprang to the window and shaded his eyes from the rising sun to make sure. There was no mistake. The man was undoubtedly the leader of the outlaws!

Conomo was alone and on foot. In his belt he carried a pistol and over his shoulder hung a rifle.

How had he escaped?

To Matt it was a perplexing question, but in reality the explanation was simple enough.

By hard work he had succeeded in getting the gag out of his mouth.

No sooner was this done than he had set up a loud cry for help.

One of the outlaws who was passing at the time heard the cry, and paused to find out what was the matter.

Conomo quickly explained the case. Five minutes later the man burst open the door and released the prisoner.

The news of the escape of the captives soon spread among the men in the cavern.

As we know, a rush was at once made for the trap-door, only to lead to the discovery that it had been securely fastened from above.

"We are cornered!" exclaimed one of the men. "Who was on guard?"

"Doodle," said another.

"No such thing!" squeaked the old man. "I was fast asleep. Smart was on."

Smart had been suspected by many for a long time.

It was instantly surmised that he had joined the captives in their flight.

"We'd better git out," suggested another

of the outlaws. "They'll have the whole of Danville down here in less than an hour."

His advice was quickly followed.

In great haste they packed up such things as they could carry, and started at once.

Conomo lingered behind.

As captain he said he thought it his duty to be the last to leave, so as to be sure all his men had escaped in safety.

When they were all gone, the outlaw quickly opened his private chest and took out a number of bank-bills of large denominations, and also a bag of gold and diamonds.

Then he secured his weapons, and other trappings.

"Now I am off!" he exclaimed to himself.

"It is good I have kept the tree passage to myself. So many men coming from that place would surely be discovered, but alone I will be quite safe. By the saints, how I hate that boy! Try my best, he seems at every turn to escape me! But it won't be for long. Hank Conomo is not to be beaten, and his life must yet be mine!"

Reaching up in a crevice of the wall, he drew forth a long rope-ladder. This he unrolled, and, by a dexterous throw, landed the end over a rock far above him.

He tested it to see that it was secure. Satisfied that it would hold, he quickly ascended to the top.

He now stood on a narrow ledge directly to one side of the roof of the chamber.

Beyond in the gloom could be seen a passageway scarcely two feet wide by three high.

Through the narrow opening he pushed his way for a distance of two hundred feet.

At length he came to the roots of a large elm tree. Among them was a hollow leading up the trunk of the tree.

Digging his spurs into the sides, Conomo ascended rapidly to the first branches of the elm and drew himself outside.

For a minute he looked and listened intently to discover if any one was near.

Not a sound or sight disturbed him, and, satisfied that he was quite alone, he dropped lightly to the ground.

He was in the midst of a clump of trees that stood back from the road, and not over twenty rods from the Haunted Mill.

For an instant he hesitated, not knowing which way to turn.

The assassin well knew that he was playing a desperate game. If once caught, his chances of saving his life would not be worth mentioning.

He knew it would probably be best for him to take to the mountains at once.

Yet he had an almost irresistible desire to return to the old mill and see what had been done and who was guarding the place.

Down in his heart he hoped to catch sight of Matt.

If so, he expected to use his rifle with deadly results.

With a cat-like tread he stole through the undergrowth.

Suddenly he paused.

A man had crossed his path. By the faint light Conomo recognized the tall form of Smart.

"Hal it is the traitor!" he exclaimed to himself. "But what is he doing here, and where are the others?"

For a second he paused in thought. Then he raised his rifle and took careful aim.

"Death to all traitors!" he muttered. "It will be a lesson to the men."

He was on the point of pulling the trigger, when a thought struck him.

The sound of the rifle might bring others to the spot.

"What a fool I was not to think of it before," he went on. "I must try some other way."

He slung the rifle over his shoulder. Then he drew out a dagger, one of the last things he had secured before leaving the cave.

"It is just as effective and makes no noise," he continued, as he felt of the point of the weapon. "Now, Smart, we will see if you can leave at your desire after taking our oath!"

With stealthy steps he crept up to the man, who stood leaning against a tree, in deep thought.

In a moment Conomo was directly behind him.

The next instant he took a step nearer and plunged the dagger into Smart's back.

With hardly as much as a sigh the unconscious victim sunk to the ground, dead.

"Quickly done," cried the cold-blooded villain. "Let men beware how they deal falsely with Hank Conomo!"

He put the dagger in his bosom, and then continued on his way toward the mill.

At length he reached the road directly to one side of the mill. No one was in sight, and made reckless by his recent bloody deed, the double assassin crossed to the window and peered in.

The reader can well surmise what he saw. Stella Dinsmore seated upon a bench, and, pistol in hand, watching the trap door.

The sight astonished Conomo beyond measure. He had thought that Matt had taken her at once to Danville. Where was the boy?

He looked around but could see nothing. Was it possible that she could be alone?

"If she is, then I'm in luck," he thought. "I'll risk it—she is far too beautiful to lose. I'll win her love or gain her money yet!"

Taking out the dagger, again he stepped around to the door. It was open, and in a second he was inside.

Stella's back was toward him. In a trice he had caught her arm, wrenched the pistol from her, and faced her with the pointed blade at her heart.

"Make the least noise and I will kill you!" he hissed.

Stella could not have cried out had she so desired. Her astonishment was so great that it rendered her dumb. She did not even rise from her seat.

"So I have you once more in my power, my pretty!" went on Conomo. "This time I will not allow you to escape me! Where is that ooy that was with you?"

Stella made no answer. Her heart beat wildly. From the height of hope she was plunged to the depth of despair.

"Do you hear me? Where is he?"

"Let me go!"

"Not much! Come along with me."

Conomo had caught her savagely by the arm, and was dragging her toward the door.

No, no!" she cried.

I say yes. I suppose he has gone to Danville for help, so the sooner we get out of here the better."

And, holding the girl tightly by the wrist, Conomo led the way away from the mill.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT THE DUG-OUT.

If the outlaw was perplexed as to his further actions, he did not let his fair captive know of it.

He led her rapidly along through the undergrowth, across the lower road and then the upper.

Stella was several times tempted to ask him whither he was taking her, but she knew it would be useless to do so, and therefore remained silent.

How earnestly she wished Matt had returned at Conomo's appearance. Little did she dream of our hero's fearful trial just at that time.

"When did Matt expect to return?" asked the assassin, as they moved along.

"I do not know," she replied.

"He went to Danville?"

Stella was silent. Her first terror was over, and her courage was returning.

The assassin's face glowed with anger.

"You defy me?" he cried.

"I do."

"Beware!"

"I'm not afraid of you. I was first, because you startled me. But it is all gone now."

"I will have your life!"

"Take it, if you must. I am in your power."

Stella stopped suddenly. The intense strain upon her nerves had been too much for her. She closed her eyes and sunk back in a dead faint.

Conomo was a pretty close reader of human nature, and he saw at once that she was not shamming.

A few seconds before, they had crossed a small mountain brook. He hurried back to this, and getting his hat full of water, poured it over Stella's face and neck, and also a small portion of it into her mouth.

Almost immediately the girl gave a gasp and opened her eyes.

In a few moments she had regained her full consciousness.

Then he commanded her to get up.

But even had she been willing to comply, she was too weak to do so.

She staggered to her feet, but at the first step forward sunk down again.

Then he raised her up, but she hung to him like a dead weight.

"Reckon she's reached her limit clean," he muttered to himself. "I'll have to carry her if I want to take her any further. Well, she is too valuable a prize to leave behind, so here goes!"

He caught her up and slung her limp form over his shoulder. Then he set off as rapidly as possible for the mountains.

At length, in a thicket of trees, he came upon a deserted hunters' camp. There was a rude shelter built of tree-boughs and cypress branches, and inside several couches of dry moss.

"Just the thing," he said to himself.

"This camp ain't been used for a month or more, and it ain't likely that the owners will return to-day. We'll step inside, take a seat and consider our plans."

Thus speaking to himself, he stooped low, and entering, cast Stella upon one of the piles of moss. Her eyes were wide open, but the poor girl was too broken down to offer any resistance.

Conomo's load had been a heavy one. He threw himself down on the ground beside his victim to rest himself and to smoke a Spanish cigarette.

"Ah, but she is beautiful!" he thought to himself, as he allowed the smoke to curl upward in lazy rings and gazed at Stella in open admiration. "No wonder Ranvelt was crazy to have her as soon as he saw her. You would not find another such a perfect face and form in a thousand! And worth three hundred thousand dollars! She must be mine! She shall be mine! I swear it!"

Suddenly Conomo sprang to his feet. He had finished his cigarette and his deliberation at the same time.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"No," she replied.

"Well, I am, and you soon will be. I am going to get something to eat. Sit up a moment."

He slipped her hands behind her and fastened them to a stake.

"This will keep you from running away while I am gone," he went on. "Now if you keep quiet I will soon return, and treat you to breakfast."

"I want nothing from you," rejoined Stella, coldly.

"Perhaps you will later on. Good-by, my pretty."

With these words Conomo quitted the shelter.

During his rides around the country he had on several occasions passed Sam Lan-

ders's dug-out, and knew its location very well.

He struck out for it at once.

And thus it was that Matt saw the assassin coming up the path.

A hurried conversation took place at once between Matt and the owners of the dug-out.

When Conomo knocked at the door it was readily opened.

"Good-morning," he said, civilly, to the old man who had answered his knock.

"Good-mornin', stranger!" responded Landers.

"Can I get something to eat here?" went on the outlaw, as he stepped into the room.

"Waal, I dunno, stranger. We ain't got much, Susan and I ain't."

"Well, trot out what you have got, and I'll pay you well for it."

"Thanks, stranger! Take a cheer. Susan and I ain't as rich as we might be, so we live eckernomically like. Been traveling far?"

"Quite a distance. Say, I want that breakfast put up in a basket or something. Put in enough for two. I've got a sick friend down the mountain waiting for me."

"Oh! Yer don't want ter eat it here?" asked Mrs. Landers.

"No; pack it up. The best you've got. Only don't be too long. There's a dollar for you."

And Conomo threw a bill on the table.

The woman began to do as she had been bidden. She did not, however, move very fast, and several times cast an anxious glance toward a closet in the corner.

"Belong around these parts?" queried Sam Landers.

"I come from above Wingate's Landing," returned Conomo, with an impatient glance at the woman. "My friend is quite faint, and I want to hurry back," he added.

"Maybe you want help?" began Landers.

"Oh, no," rejoined the outlaw, hastily.

"He is only faint from a hard ride. He is quite young, and as delicate as a woman, and can't stand it. Give me a few nice things to take him if you've got 'em."

"I'll give you the best I've got," replied Mrs. Landers, who, for once, having her mind full of a certain plot, was not as talkative as usual.

In what seemed an awfully long time to Conomo she had made a kettle full of coffee and packed a rush basket full of bread, cold fowl, and several other things.

"Here you are," she said, as she handed it over. "Might I ask who you be, sir?"

"My name is Ralph Sonner," replied the outlaw, in a hap-hazard fashion. "I reckon I'll be going now. Thanks for your kindness."

"Not at all, sir. Thank you for the money," put in Sam Landers.

With the kettle and the basket in his hands, Conomo quickly left the dug-out.

No sooner was the door closed upon him than Matt stepped from the closet, in which he had all this while been concealed.

"Why didn't yer pounce upon him as yer expected?" demanded Landers. "I thought you intended ter grab him, first thing."

"You had a splendid chance," added his wife. "Maybe, though, he wasn't the right man? He said his name was Sonner."

"He was the right man," replied Matt, "and I was just on the point of coming out and making him throw up his hands when he said something about wanting food for a sick friend. I have an idea who that sick friend is."

"Who?"

"Miss Dinsmore. I'm convinced that he has made her captive again. If I had shot him, I might not have been able to find her. As it is, I intend to follow Conomo at once!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

"YER think he's got the gal ag'in?" queried Landers, after a short pause.

"It looks so to me," returned Matt. "I'm going to find out in short order."

"I'd go with you if it wasn't for my rheumatism!" exclaimed the old man. "If he's as guilty as you say it'd do my heart good ter see him git his deserts."

"I guess I can manage him alone," returned the other and left the dug-out.

He did not deem it advisable to go for his horse, but thought it best to follow the outlaw on foot.

It was no easy matter to keep Conomo in view. The trees, bushes and hollows often made him disappear in a most mysterious manner, and then Matt would have to wait until he sighted the outlaw again.

Presently Matt saw Conomo pause and look around, and at once his pursuer drew behind a tree.

Apparently satisfied that he was not being followed, the outlaw went on, and in a moment entered the shelter of tree-branches.

In a second Matt was close to the shelter, and, making a slight detour, came up directly behind it and peered in.

Conomo was in the act of untying the bonds that bound Stella Dinsmore to the stake. The girl was deadly pale, and it was plain to see she was suffering intensely.

"Come, I've brought you something to eat," announced the outlaw. "We have a long journey before us, and you want some strength. I'm not going to carry you any further."

"You need not," answered Stella.

"I'll have to if you can't walk."

"Oh, no. Leave me behind."

"Ho! ho! Easily said, but it will never be done. You go with me, beyond a doubt."

"I guess not."

It was a voice from the doorway. With a startled look Conomo confronted Detective Matt.

"You!" he exclaimed, dropping the food from his hands.

"Exactly! Throw up your hands!" Conomo's face grew livid with rage.

Nevertheless, as he looked at the gleaming weapon in the boy's hand he obeyed the command.

"Oh, Matt, how glad I am that you've come!" exclaimed Stella, springing toward him.

"You are sick?" he asked hastily.

"I was, but only with despair," she rejoined, with a smile, that brought the hot blood to the boy's face.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked the outlaw.

"Put you where you will never do any more harm," replied Matt, decisively.

"I will never give in to a boy!" burst out Conomo.

"You will," replied the fearless Matt, in a ringing voice. "Stella, will you please take his weapons away?"

The girl started to obey the command. With an imprecation the assassin sprang back.

"Never!" he cried. "You got the best of me once, but you shall not do it again. I will die first!"

For once Conomo's intense hatred got the better of his fears. Stella had secured his pistol, but his dagger still remained with him, and whipping it out he rushed at his enemy.

A terrific struggle ensued. Matt was afraid to fire his pistol for fear of hitting Stella, and, as Conomo sprang upon him, he was compelled to draw his knife.

Together the two rolled upon the floor, Matt borne backward by Conomo's heavy onslaught.

Over and over the two rolled, now in the center of the hut, now with a heavy crash against the side.

Suddenly, with an intense effort Conomo withdrew his right wrist from Matt's grasp, and suddenly held the dagger high in the air.

"Now die!" he cried, as he set his teeth to plunge the weapon in Matt's breast.

CHAPTER XIX.

DEATH OF CONOMO.—CONCLUSION.

At this moment a sudden report rung out. The knife dropped from Conomo's grasp and his arm fell powerless to his side.

Stella had fired a bullet through his wrist. In an instant Matt had his knife at the assassin's heart.

Conomo turned deadly pale.

"Would you kill a defenseless man?" he asked.

"No," replied the boy detective. "I will not. The law shall take its course."

Conomo shuddered, well knowing what that meant. He would be dangling from a tree in less than an hour!

"Let me go and I will make it well worth your while," he pleaded.

"You cannot offer me anything that I would accept for your release," returned Matt, coolly.

"Do you think that I have forgotten that you murdered my father?"

Conomo shrunk back.

"I do not forget so easily," went on the captor. "I swore on the morning after you committed that foul deed that I would track you down and either kill you or hand you over to justice. I mean to keep that vow."

"You shall not!" shrieked Conomo. His eyes were rolling wildly. "I swore revenge upon your father, for he married the girl I loved, and I swore revenge upon you because you are her son!"

"You loved my mother?" exclaimed Matt, in surprise.

"Yes, curse her, I did! She was the daughter of old Brown, who kept the mill. Brown was willing I should marry her, but he let her slip through his fingers. But long, long afterward I came back and we had it out."

"You killed Mr. Brown—my grandfather?"

"Who says so?"

"I say so, for I know it."

"Well, I admit it. He said he was sorry he had opposed his daughter's marriage to your father, and we had hot words about it, so I paid the miller for the enmity he showed me. I hate you all—and I will yet have my full revenge!"

As the villain uttered the last words he struck the young man a terrible blow in the face, and before Matt could recover the assassin sprang through the open doorway and was gone!

In a moment Matt was after him.

"He shall not escape me this time," cried the now enraged boy. "The assassin of my grandfather, my father and of Stella's guardian shall either die or be brought to justice."

With sharp eyes on the outlaw, Matt pressed him close.

Conomo's path was up the mountain-side. There was nothing the matter with his legs, and he ran like a deer.

Matt kept him well in sight, and when he saw a chance fired his pistol.

The ball took effect in the outlaw's shoulder.

He uttered a sharp cry, and staggered forward.

Directly in front of him was a deep ravine, and over its brink he stumbled.

Turning over and over, the red-handed outlaw went crashing to the bottom, where he struck the rocks below with a sickening thud.

A half-suppressed shriek and all was quiet.

The career of Hank Conomo was ended. He had indeed gone to the "higher court."

Matt reached the edge of the ravine and peered over. At first he could see nothing; then he discovered Conomo's body, and, with considerable difficulty, found a way down to it.

The outlaw lay with his head under his breast.

The fall had really broken his neck.

"It is done," whispered Matt to himself.

"Father's murder is avenged!"

For a few seconds he looked at the lifeless body in silence; then the long-pent agony began to assert itself, and he cried.

How long he sat there, on a rock beside the still body, he did not know, but at length a warm arm stole around his neck and a gentle hand stroked the hair from his brow.

He looked up to behold Stella Dinsmore!

Unable to stand the suspense she had followed him, and had bravely found her way to his side.

Her eyes were suffused with tears. Never had Matt seen her look so beautiful.

"He is dead," she said in a low voice.

"Yes," he returned, almost in a whisper.

"Did you—?"

Matt shook his head.

"No; he fell over and his neck was broken," he explained.

"I am glad," she went on, soothingly. "I wanted to see justice done, but—but I did not want to see his blood on your hands."

"Why not? He murdered my father and your guardian and thus filled our lives with wretchedness. But, it is all over now. Let us leave the ruffian here where he lies. His judgment is in higher hands than ours."

The two made their way up from the ravine to the high ground and then off to where Matt had tied his horse.

"You saved my life," remarked the boy, as

they mounted. "Had you not stayed his arm the dagger would have pierced my breast."

"And you not only saved my life," she rejoined, "but you saved me from a fate that might, perhaps, have been worse than death. Matt, I will never be able to show all the gratitude I feel to you!"

"No gratitude is due. It is enough to know that I have saved one so worthy and beautiful from an unhappy fate. When you first spoke to me upon the piazza of Billy Banter's tavern I longed to be of some service to you—to do something for you by which you might possibly remember me."

"I shall never forget you!" she cried. "To me you will always be the best, the dearest—"

Stella stopped short.

"Go on!" he urged.

"No, no. I ought to be ashamed. I—I mean I ought not to say so much."

"Perhaps not. You are rich and gifted."

"So are you!"

The words were out before the fair girl realized what she had said.

"I!" he exclaimed. "I'm not worth much over a hundred dollars all told."

"Indeed, you are rich from this day forth; half of my fortune belongs to you."

"No! no! I'll not take it," he protested.

"You must, and shall!" and, turning around she looked down into his eyes.

"I won't, unless—"

"Unless what, Matt?" with beaming face.

"That face did the business!"

"Unless—unless some time—when we're both older, you know, you give me yourself!" he blurted out; his own face fairly on fire.

"Wait and see!" she rejoined, with a smile that told more than words.

Matt's return to Danville with Stella Dinsmore was a complete surprise all around. His story was told in front of Billy Banter's tavern, and when it was corroborated by the fair girl who stood at his side, he was applauded to the echo.

A couple of men were at once dispatched to keep guard over the old mill, which every one admitted must be Matt's property, while a party of eight, headed by Matt and Banter, dashed off to the mountain in search of the members of Conomo's gang.

In the mean time Mrs. Banter took charge of Stella. The poor girl cried bitterly over the body of her guardian, which was to be buried the next day.

Her guardian's partner had been sent for by a letter to Wingate's Landing, and thence by telegram to Boston, and in the evening a reply was received that Mr. Fiske was already on the way, and would be there in five days.

On the following day, at noon, the scouring-party returned with the dead body of Conomo, and six of his band as captives. The others were dead, shot in a struggle that ensued when an attack was made upon the temporary camp far up the mountain-side.

After dinner Matt attended Mr. Dinsmore's funeral, and then rode down to the old mill.

In the rooms that had been used by old Brown he found abundant evidence that the man really was his grandfather. And more! he found papers that gave to Mrs. Morrison the mill and its adjoining lands, and also a vast tract which had been claimed by Rube Beane, but which really belonged to the old miller.

This tract Beane was compelled, later on, to vacate, much to his disgust.

Only a month after, metal was discovered on the rugged place, and Matt, through Mr. Fiske who became his guardian as well as Stella Dinsmore's, sold out the property for the neat sum of eighty thousand dollars.

Of course the counterfeiters' den in the chambers under the old mill were thoroughly ransacked by the Government authorities, and all the plates, paper and presses were carried away.

Each of the captured outlaws and counterfeiters was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment.

Five years have passed. Idaho Matt and Stella Dinsmore are happy as man and wife. They are wealthy, and, among other things, own one of the largest catzle-ranches in Southeastern Colorado.

To wish them all the joy this life can bring is to echo the reader's own thought.

THE END.

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